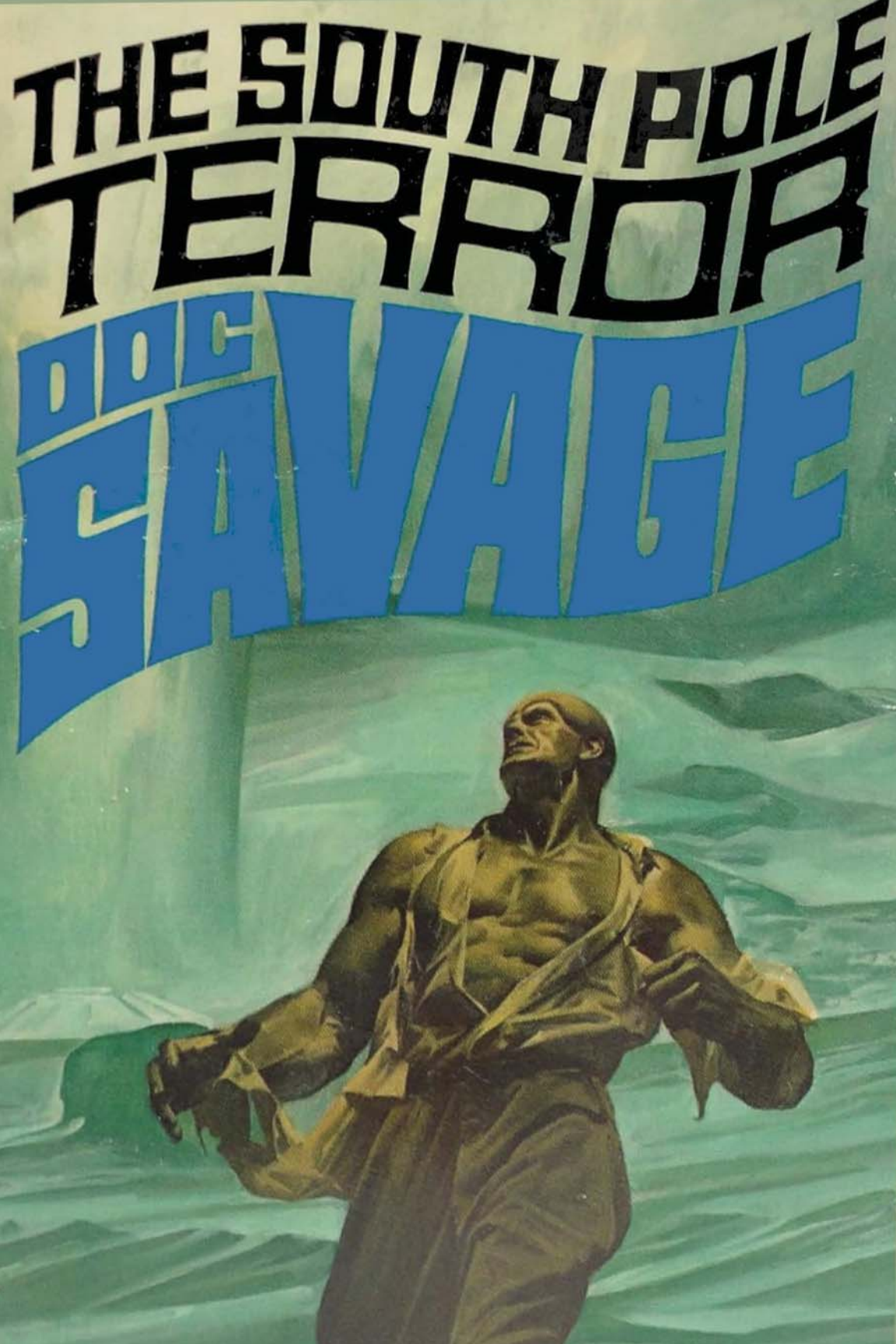
THE SOUTH POLE TERROR

DOC SAVAGE



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BOOKS

KENNETH ROBESON

SOUTH POLE TERROR

(South Pole Terror)

Original title:

SOUTH POLE TERROR

Translated from the American original by
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1.

Doc Savage learnt of the mystery surrounding the so-called ‘Silver Sloop’ at the same time as several million other people, and he was no less astonished than they were. A Coastguard patrol boat had spotted the sloop in Long Island Sound. It was night-time, and the Coastguard called out to the sloop because it had not set its navigation lights. There was no reply from the sloop. It drifted with its sails flapping like a ghost ship. So the Coastguard men boarded it.

The next morning, the story was all over the newspapers, not just in New York, but throughout the United States and beyond. Doc Savage was in the habit of reading newspapers – the most important ones in the world, in fact. This habit was linked to his extraordinary profession, his notorious curiosity and his scepticism. He knew that newspapers were generally not very reliable: anyone wishing to be accurately informed had to take the trouble to compare reports.

The silver sloop was about fifty feet long and sleekly built. Externally it was made of teak, whilst the interior was finished in mahogany and chrome. Experts always spoke highly of this vessel, and anyone who had ever set foot on board came back down with a gleam in their eyes.

The men from the Coastguard were experts, but when they left the vessel, they were in a state of panic, and some leaned over the railing and threw up their dinner. What they had seen on board was so gruesome that the reporters were not allowed to photograph it when the sloop had been towed into New London harbour. Many newspaper readers are unaware of this, but they are often spared seeing images that might turn their stomachs.

The coastguards had found a dead man in the cockpit who, in life, had been a well-known banker and philanthropist. The right hand of this kind-hearted man was clenched in the hair of a young woman whose throat had been slit from ear to ear. Subsequent investigations revealed that the woman had been blackmailing the philanthropist for years over a youthful indiscretion.

The investigations revealed that there had been fifteen people on board the sloop. Fourteen of them were found, and all fourteen were dead. But only the woman had been murdered. The other bodies showed no signs of injury whatsoever.

The coastguard initially suspected gas poisoning, but they were unable to provide any evidence of this.

The fifteen individuals were identified. Without exception, the passengers belonged to what is known as high society; most of them were well-off or even wealthy. Nothing negative about them had ever been made public. The crew, too, enjoyed a respectable reputation.

Doctors tried unsuccessfully to determine the cause of death, and detectives also set to work. They had scarcely more success than the doctors. All the victims had sunburn, but nobody found this fact remarkable. Although the season was well advanced, there were still warm days, and the previous day had even been unusually hot.

Strangely, the ship's chronometer had been set back and had stopped at three o'clock sharp. The detectives guessed it was three o'clock in the afternoon. The tar caulking had been partially forced out from between the planks, and a journalist wrote a sensational article, claiming that the sight had reminded him of a gigantic fist that had gripped the ship and crushed it.

What was interesting was that one person was missing. This became apparent after the detectives had established that the sloop had set sail that morning with fifteen people on board. It was supposed to remain in the Sound for just one day. The missing person was Velma Crale.

The name immediately made the headlines, for Velma Crale was famous. She had flown solo across the Atlantic and the Pacific; she had discovered the legendary white Indians in the Amazon basin and introduced some of them to the civilised world; she had been symbolically presented with the keys to the city by the Mayor of New York and dined with the President of the United States.

Her most recent adventure had been a flying expedition to the South Pole. She had returned two weeks earlier. In a manner uncharacteristic of her, she had not exploited the flight for publicity. She had merely announced that she had discovered nothing of significance. Generally speaking, she caused quite a stir, even if it bore no reasonable relation to what she actually had to say. She fought for women's rights without giving a thought to the fact that women in the United States had long since enjoyed every right they could possibly dream of, and her career served only to prove that women were superior to men.

Journalists were astonished when Velma Crale remained silent on the subject of the South Pole. She had refused to be interviewed or photographed; only one photographer had managed to take a snapshot. The newspapers had had to make do with the extensive material they kept in their archives.

And so now Velma Crale was missing, having left behind thirteen dead men and one dead woman. The world was searching for Velma Crale. No one accused her, no one blamed her for anything. In fact, the thought arose that whoever was responsible for the other bodies might have thrown Velma Crale overboard in the commotion, and she might have drowned. The longer Velma Crale remained missing, the more this suspicion took hold.

Then Doc Savage received a message from Velma Crale.

Doc Savage was known for constantly meddling in other people's affairs, helping the oppressed and punishing the oppressors, as far as his power and abilities would allow. He had not become rich through this occupation. In fact, he

on principle to accept payment for his efforts. Nevertheless, he was financially independent, and his fortune would have been sufficient to keep a medium-sized European state afloat for a year. Without this fortune, Doc Savage would never have been able to begin the fight he was waging in the first place. Some of the powerful figures of this world, who had no interest in seeing injustice punished, would have silenced him.

But it was not only Doc's worldly possessions that were remarkable; his intellectual abilities and physical strength were no less so. He lived on the eighty-sixth floor of an imposing skyscraper in New York. Serving, in a sense, as his business premises, he had a large reception room, a spacious laboratory equipped with the very latest technical innovations, and a library that was even larger, containing every scientific book from past and present.

On the day Velma Crale called, Doc Savage was not at home; the answering machine recorded the call. When Doc returned, he played back the tape and heard a pleasant woman's voice.

"Velma Crale here," said the voice. "Something terrible has happened; you must help. You'll receive a parcel this afternoon. Examine the contents and decide for yourself what you want to do with it."

The message had arrived at quarter past five; by the time Doc played back the tape, it was three hours later. He rang the doorman of the high-rise and received confirmation that a parcel had indeed been left for him. He asked for it to be sent up.

The parcel was cube-shaped, about thirty centimetres wide and high, wrapped in brown linen, tied with copper wire and quite heavy. Doc Savage placed the parcel under the X-ray machine to find out whether it contained a bomb. He was notoriously cautious; otherwise, he would have been dead long ago. He switched on the machine.

A jet of flame shot up, and a massive explosion shattered the windows. Black smoke billowed from the empty window frames.

2.

At least half of Manhattan's inhabitants had heard the explosion, and many had also seen the black smoke. Some had narrowly escaped the shards of glass that suddenly rained down from the sky.

Reporters and photographers raced to the skyscraper, but the police were there before them and sealed the building off completely. The journalists protested because they weren't allowed in, but it was to no avail. They also protested because they weren't given any information. Finally, an ambulance arrived. Six men in white suits took the lift up and, after a while, came back down onto the street carrying a stretcher. One of the photographers snapped a picture. The journalists and the onlookers, who had also gathered by then, craned their necks. At first they murmured among themselves, then shouts broke out.

Lying on the stretcher was the body of a tall, muscular man. His skin had a bronze hue, as though death had been unable to touch it. The famous golden eyes, reminiscent of unfathomable lakes whose surfaces were kept in constant motion by a gentle breeze, stared blankly up at the sky.

The onlookers recognised the imposing figure, and after a few seconds the commotion died down. The remaining photographers refrained from taking pictures, and the reporters refrained from bothering the police officers and the men in white. The people were paralysed with shock. They knew that Doc Savage often found himself in danger because the task he had set himself could frequently not be accomplished any other way. He had always survived the dangers, but it was only a matter of time before he would succumb to them sooner or later, and now it had come to this: Doc Savage was dead

...

Silently, the crowd watched as the stretcher was loaded into the car and the vehicle slowly began to move. Once the car had disappeared round a corner, the journalists snapped back to the present, and now they did indeed bombard the police officers with questions.

The officers confirmed what people had already suspected: the explosion had devastated Doc Savage's laboratory; the body had been recovered from the rubble. No fire had broken out; the jet of flame had died out of its own accord.

The photographers now wanted to carry out their duties as well, but they were prevented from doing so so as not to hinder the investigation. They wanted to know what was to happen to the body. They were told that no decision had yet been made on that matter. Who was responsible for the explosion – had Doc been conducting an experiment, or had someone carried out an attack on him? The police officers pretended not to know.

At that very moment, a man who was not a journalist pushed his way through the crowd towards the front. He wanted to get to Doc Savage. Apparently, he'd heard, Doc Savage was dead. What was the story behind it?

"It's true," said one of the policemen gloomily. "Doc Savage is dead."

"Oh, bloody hell!" The man gritted his teeth. "That Velma Crale!"

The policemen grew suspicious and turned their attention to the man.

"What do you mean by that?" asked one.

The man he was addressing was tall and bony, with a horse-like face, blond hair standing out from his head like the bristles of a broom, and astonishingly blue eyes. His suit looked as though it were made of excellent fabric, but by a wretched tailor.

"Why?" he asked, feigning simplicity. "What do I mean by what?"

"You've just mentioned the name Velma Crale!" grumbled the policeman. "Velma Crale has been missing ever since the silver sloop with the fourteen dead bodies turned up!"

The man with the horse-like face shook his head vigorously.

“I didn’t mention that name,” he insisted. “Why on earth would I have done that?”

“I’m the one asking the questions here!” roared the policeman. “You mentioned the name!”

The journalists didn’t interfere; they just pricked up their ears. The policeman was very displeased.

“What’s your name?” he demanded. “Can you show me some ID?”

“Derek Flammen,” said the gaunt man.

He pulled his ID card out of his pocket. The policeman studied the paper and handed it back.

“I recognise the name,” he said lamely. “Didn’t you carry out some research at the South Pole?”

“I’m a researcher,” said the man simply. “I’d hoped that Doc Savage would fund my next research expedition to the South Pole, which is why I wanted to speak to him.”

The policeman had apparently forgotten why he’d stopped the gaunt man. He apologised. The man nodded gently and walked away. The policeman watched him go, then stepped inside the building. He made his way to the porter’s lodge and the telephone. He picked up the receiver and dialled a number.

“I have some interesting news,” he said.

“And what is it?” said a metallic voice at the other end of the line.

The policeman repeated the conversation he’d had with Derek Flammen. There was a moment’s silence on the line, then the metallic voice spoke again.

“And did he really say, ‘That damned Velma Crale’?”

“There can be no doubt about it, but he denies it.”

“Thank you,” said the voice.

There was a click on the line. The policeman hung up.

One of the journalists had followed Derek Flammen. He caught up with him in a side street and asked him for a comment. Derek Flammen paused to think.

“The world knows regrettably little about the life’s work of the so-called Bronze Man,” he said at last. He was used to speaking in a way that was ready for the press; the journalist merely had to take notes. “But people have long memories. I dare to predict that the millstones of time, which erase so many celebrities from our memory, will grind the contours of the extraordinary figure of Doc Savage into even sharper relief than we consider likely today. His character was like a diamond that cuts through the decades as though they were glass. Humanity has today suffered one of its greatest losses.”

“An excellent comment,” said the newspaperman. “With your permission, we shall use it as an obituary.”

Once again, Derek Flammen gave a gentle nod and walked on to the nearest taxi rank. He had himself taken to a hotel on the outskirts of town and was so lost in thought that he paid no attention to whether he was being followed. At one point he laughed out loud, causing the driver to turn round towards him in alarm. Flammen didn’t notice.

‘That damned Velma Crale!’ he muttered to himself. ‘I’d like to know what that woman was born for at all.’

The driver didn’t know either, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He didn’t want to interrupt his passenger’s monologue, but Flammen said nothing more.

He got out in front of the hotel, paid the driver, smiled amiably at the doorman and walked into the lobby. He made his way towards the lift, smiled at the lift attendant too, and was taken upstairs. He took the key to his suite out of his pocket and unlocked the door. By now it had grown dark, and there were no lights on in the rooms. Absent-mindedly, he strode inside, closed the door behind him and flicked the light switch.

‘Stop right there!’ said a sharp voice. ‘Don’t move!’

But Derek Flammen did move after all. His hand was still on the switch, and he flicked it again in a flash, throwing himself to one side at the same time. He ducked, and at that very moment he was struck on the right shoulder. He groaned, lunged forward and lashed out. He hit a chair and cursed under his breath.

A second blow crashed into his right upper arm, and Flammen retreated. The room was pitch black, yet the attacker found him. This time, he landed a blow to Flammen's head.

Flammen hissed with rage, then realised why the attacker could see him. Flammen's hands glowed as if they'd been dipped in a phosphorescent liquid. He glanced towards the door and realised where the liquid had come from. The inside of the door handle was coated with it.

'Give up,' said the voice. 'Otherwise I'll have to shoot.'

"What do you want from me?" asked Flammen indignantly. "If you want to steal something, just do it and get out of here!"

The ceiling light came on, and Flammen stared at the person in the room with him.

"Velma Crale!" he said, taken aback.

Velma Crale loved to be described as a twentieth-century Amazon, but she didn't look like the way people generally imagine Amazons to look. She was small and dainty, and without her war paint she was rather like a grey mouse. Her face was not ugly, but neither was it of remarkable beauty, and as she now stood before Derek Flammen, no one would have believed that two English aristocrats had duelled over her, and that an Indian *nabob* had sold twenty-two of his wives and plundered one of his provinces in order to win Velma Crale's favour.

Derek Flammen remembered her differently. He knew that she could dress up like a film star and then exude a similar aura. He noticed that she was deliberately dressed simply, and her fiery red mane had been dyed a nondescript brown. She had evidently wanted to go into hiding without being recognised, and so far she had succeeded.

She aimed a pistol at Flammen. He suspected she'd also struck him with the gun. Her fists certainly weren't that hard.

'Be careful!' she warned. 'I've shot more men than that.'

She wasn't exaggerating. Flammen knew that she'd single-handedly put a gang of bandits to flight when she'd made an emergency landing with her aeroplane in the jungles of New Guinea. Flammen didn't take his eyes off the muzzle of the gun, and the girl didn't take her eyes off him. So neither of them noticed how the sliding window opened a little. Nor did either of them have any reason to pay attention to the window. It was twenty storeys down to the street, ten to the roof, and the façade was as smooth as a mirror.

Derek Flammen sighed deeply.

'You've got yourself into quite a mess,' he said. 'You won't get away with this.'

Velma Crale snorted contemptuously through her nose, as if she were facing a toothless dog that was making a move to bite her.

"You're as arrogant as all men," she said. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Of course not," said Flammen. "After all, you've got a gun in your hand."

She snorted again and flung the pistol onto the bed. Then she planted her hands on her hips and walked slowly towards Flammen. He laughed and lunged at her. He stopped laughing. She punched him in the right eye, yanked out a handful of his hair and kicked him in the shin.

Flammen groaned and fell face-first onto the bed. Velma Crale sat on his back, nearly dislocating his arms, and felt a sense of satisfaction.

'I warned you,' she said. 'I'm not afraid of men, even without a gun.'

Velma searched Flammen's pockets and took a pocket knife and a shag pipe from him. She tied Flammen's hands and feet with the

bed sheet, which she had torn into narrow strips before Flammen arrived, and loomed menacingly over him.

‘Where is Thurston H. Wardhouse?’ she demanded.

“I’ve never heard that name before,” replied Flammen.

“Really?” Velma chuckled maliciously. “But as it happens, I happen to know that Wardhouse is leaving Southampton on the *Regis* this evening!”

Flammen preferred to say nothing.

“I’ve been playing detective a bit,” Velma explained. “I know everything, including how many millions are involved.”

Flammen swallowed with difficulty. He remained silent.

“Your gang shouldn’t have messed with me,” Velma declared. “I’m going to crush you, and Wardhouse will help me. You didn’t know that, did you?”

Flammen gasped, but he didn’t let himself be drawn into a reply. At that moment, there was a knock at the door. The window was still open. Velma picked up the pistol from the bed and went to the door.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘A telegram,’ replied a man’s voice from outside. Velma

Crale frowned and thought for a moment.

“Slip it under the door,” she said.

A yellow envelope was slid under the door. Velma picked it up and saw that the telegram was addressed to Derek Flammen. She tore open the envelope and took out the folded piece of paper. Then she groaned softly and collapsed.

3.

A key jangled in the lock; the door swung open. Half a dozen men pushed their way into the room; the last one shut the door behind him. The men were dressed plainly and looked like nature lovers, yet their skin was reddened as if they'd been out in the sun too long. None of them looked particularly trustworthy.

'Tie her up and gag her,' said the leader, pointing at Velma Crale.
"The gas in the envelope will only last for two minutes at most."

He was taller than his companions and wore glasses with thick tinted lenses. One of the men went over to the girl and bent over her. He groaned and nearly fell to the floor himself. With some effort, he straightened up and staggered to one side.

"Cheaters!" He swallowed. "That stuff's still in the air!"

"Put the girl on the bed," ordered the leader, whom his subordinate had called Cheaters. "The gas is heavier than oxygen, so it sinks."

Two men dragged Velma to the bed, tied her hands and feet together and stuffed a scrap of the torn sheet into her mouth. They had only just finished when the girl came round. She let out muffled sounds and glared venomously at the men. Derek Flammen tugged at his bonds.

"Take the bandages off me!" he said cheerfully.

Cheaters grinned.

"Take your time, mate," he said. "You're not off the hook yet."

Flammen stopped tugging at his restraints. He looked at Cheaters.

“I don’t understand a thing!” he declared. “What’s this all about?”

“You should be glad,” said Cheaters. “Because if you knew what this was all about, you’d lose your life.”

Cheaters walked over to Velma Crale and scrutinised her with interest.

“I don’t think you’ll be calling the police,” he stated matter-of-factly. “You’re wanted, you see, for sending Doc Savage the bomb. The porter in the skyscraper remembered that your name was on the parcel as the sender. The newspapers have printed special editions, and I’ve read it myself.”

He removed the gag from Velma’s mouth. She took a deep breath and looked over at Derek Flammen.

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “I’d taken you for the leader of this gang.”

“I’m no boss!” snapped Flammen. “I’ve no idea what’s going on here.”

Cheaters grinned and patted the girl on the shoulder.

“You’d better talk to me,” he ordered. “Do you know who I am?”

“Cheaters Slagg!” she said contemptuously. “You’re a crook, and you should be hanged!”

“You ought to be hanged too,” said Cheaters, “even before me. But we won’t hand you over to the Grippers, nor will we leave you to the mob. They’d lynch you because you’ve got Savage’s blood on your hands, and people wouldn’t give a damn that you’re a woman.”

Velma snorted contemptuously through her nose.

‘You’re an idiot!’ she said with conviction.

Cheaters Slagg took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as if they were hurting. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began to clean the lenses. Velma watched him grumpily.

“So Wardhouse is working with you now…,” he said, seemingly offhandedly.

“No!” the girl retorted sharply.

“We were eavesdropping outside the door,” he explained. “You were speaking quite loudly, so there’s no need to lie. Besides, we’ve been watching you for days; we even have copies of the telegrams you sent to Wardhouse. We know that Wardhouse is going aboard the *Regis* this evening.”

She clenched her teeth and fell silent. Cheaters put his glasses back on and stared intently at the girl’s face.

“We’ll take precautions,” he said. “Wardhouse won’t be coming back to New York.” Velma chewed on her lower lip; she seemed to be thinking of a suitable reply, but nothing came to mind. “Take the two of them with you,” Cheaters told Slagg.

The men hoisted Velma and Flammen onto their shoulders and dragged them out. Slagg led the way to the goods lift. The hotel porter in charge of the lift was loitering in the corridor and grinned as he looked at Slagg and his cronies. The men got into the goods lift and were taken down to the ground floor. Downstairs, Slagg pressed twenty dollars into the man’s hand.

‘Thanks,’ said the hotel porter. ‘I certainly won’t say a word.’

Slagg nodded and walked round the hotel porter. He stopped behind him whilst his men carried the two prisoners through the delivery door into a side alley.

“Of course you won’t say a word,” said Slagg, plunging a knife into the hotel porter’s back. “Not in this life, anyway.”

The hotel porter’s eyes widened and he tried to scream, but Slagg quickly clamped his hand over the man’s mouth. He waited until the man was dead, then followed his men out of the hotel. Outside, two dark saloon cars were waiting. The men had already got in; the prisoners were sitting in the back and were being guarded, even though they were still handcuffed.

‘If this carries on, a few more people will have to die,’ said Slagg grimly. ‘But it’s worth the risk. You can’t make an omelette

chips will fall."

The two saloon cars drove out of the alley and turned onto a main road. The men seemed to feel very safe; they paid no heed to whether they were being watched, and even if they had been paying attention, they probably wouldn't have noticed the shadowy figure on the corner of the street: it was pressed up against the wall of the building. Besides, the lighting was so poor that not even a keen observer could have told at a glance whether they were looking at a man or a woman.

The shadowy figure watched the saloons until they had vanished into the darkness, then stepped away from the wall and cautiously looked around to see if the Cheaters gang had left a lookout behind. Apparently this was not the case, and after a while the figure walked slowly down the street.

It stopped once more by a manhole. It pulled a flat bottle out of its pocket and dropped it. The bottle was too thick; it wouldn't fit through the slits in the manhole cover. The figure crushed the bottle and kicked the shards into the cracks. Then the figure walked away quickly, seeming to take care to stay in the shadows as much as possible.

A short while later, a policeman came walking down the street. Without any particular purpose, he stopped by the manhole and twirled his baton around his finger. Absent-mindedly, he looked down at the cover and noticed that something was glowing faintly beneath it. He got down on his hands and knees and examined the strange phenomenon, but he could not work out the source of the light. He decided to leave the eerie surroundings as quickly as possible. He stood up quickly, looked around suspiciously to see if anyone had noticed him, and walked away.

At about the same time, a clerk at the counter of a telegraph office discovered a completed form, with the exact amount for the telegram laid out beside it. The clerk had been dozing a little, as there was nothing to do, and had not seen the sender of the message at all. The message bore no signature.

The telegram was marked as urgent, so it was dispatched immediately. Shortly afterwards, a messenger delivered it to a hotel in London, and a bellboy took it to a room. The guest staying in that room was called William Harper Littlejohn.

4.

William Harper Littlejohn was known as Johnny to people who found that name too long, and bore a striking resemblance to a walking skeleton. He had the egg-shaped head of a typical intellectual and wore baggy suits and shirts with collars that were too wide. He also wore spectacles, one lens of which was abnormally thick and resembled a magnifying glass. The lens was in fact a magnifying glass; Johnny had lost sight in one eye during the war, and as he frequently needed a magnifying glass for his work, he had had it fitted into the frame for convenience. He was a world-renowned archaeologist and geologist, and the British National Museum had invited him to give a lecture on Phoenician hieroglyphs.

‘At no moment in one’s life is one safe from the unexpected,’ he said in a pretentious manner. He had a habit of expressing simple thoughts as complicatedly as possible. He tore open the envelope and read the text of the telegram. Then he threw his head back and bellowed:
‘Renny!’

He ran to the open connecting door to the adjoining room and held out his hand with the telegram. A long, gaunt, Puritan face emerged from between the pillows on the bed; a mighty fist took the telegram from Johnny. The owner of the face and the fist read the text as well.

“I had a feeling,” he said. He had a deep, booming voice. “When I plucked up the courage on Sunday to go to church again, I knew that heaven would reward me for it.”

He crawled out of bed and straightened up to his imposing height. He weighed over two hundred pounds, without a gram of fat on his bones

, but compared to his fists, the rest of his frame looked a little puny. He was an engineer, specialising in bridge-building, and his full title was Colonel John Renwick. His friends called him Renny. He went into Johnny's room with him and looked at the telegram once more. He shook his head grimly. The text read:

BOARD THE REGIS STOP DEPARTURE TONIGHT FROM SOUTHAMPTON STOP MAKE ENQUIRIES ABOUT THURSTON H. WARDHOUSE

'No signature…', muttered Renny.

"It would be completely unnecessary," said Johnny. "Probably," said Renny. "So let's sort out *the* Regis…"

Johnny went to the telephone and had a long chat with reception. Disgusted, he slammed the receiver down.

"We're out of luck," he said. "The *Regis* set sail half an hour ago."

The *Regis* was a small, fast passenger steamer that shuttled between New York and Southampton. It hadn't been long since it had left the English coast behind when the engines stopped and a seaplane touched down nearby on the smooth sea. The *Regis* lowered a boat, which picked up two passengers from the seaplane and brought them aboard the steamer. The captain of *the Regis* was indignant. He was no longer young, with grey hair, and hated anything that went against the rules. He came to meet the two passengers at the railing.

'I won't have this!' he grumbled. 'Why didn't you fly to New York or take the next ship?!'

Johnny and Renny looked down at the deck, seemingly embarrassed. They had no intention of upsetting the skipper any further. "We had no choice,"

said Renny. “We had to get on board, even if it wasn’t exactly easy.”

“Who are you?” asked the captain.

They told him. The captain’s mood improved.

“Please excuse my rudeness,” he muttered. “I know that Doc Savage has five friends who help him with his work. Are you one of them?”

“That’s right,” said Renny.

“I didn’t put it quite right.” The skipper thought for a moment. “I should have said, Doc Savage had five companions. I suppose you’re travelling to New York for the funeral...”

“No,” said Renny. “Which funeral?”

“Doc Savage’s.”

Johnny and Renny stared at the skipper in horror, then stared at each other. Until that moment, they hadn’t known what had happened in New York. The skipper didn’t realise what was going through their minds, nor did he suspect what terrible news he had just delivered to them, because he couldn’t have known that they hadn’t been informed.

“I’m sure you’ll be interested in the details,” he said. “I’ll have the ship’s newspaper brought to you. It’s compiled regularly from the radio news and is completely up to date.”

“Yes,” said Renny hoarsely. “We’d like to read it.” They followed the captain into the smoking lounge. He had two copies of the on-board newspaper handed to them and discreetly withdrew. The report was brief but comprehensive. Renny and Johnny laid the papers on the table and remained silent.

They were still silent when the captain returned and assigned them two single cabins. Without a word, they went to their rooms, and when they came into the dining room for breakfast the next morning, they looked like ghosts.

‘Horrible,’ said Renny quietly. ‘It simply can’t be true!’

Johnny poked listlessly at his food.

“One of the press photographers managed to take a picture of … of the body,” he said, somewhat aimlessly. “I was in the radio room earlier. That’s where I found out. Those damned photographers …”

“That doesn’t matter now,” said Renny.

“No.” Johnny nodded. “You’re right. It doesn’t matter now.”

“That Wardhouse must have something to do with it,” said Renny. “We’ll find him.”

“Yes,” said Johnny, his voice strained. “We’ll find him.” Renny and Johnny left their breakfast untouched and set to work, but at first they couldn’t find Thurston H. Wardhouse. The name wasn’t on the passenger list, and none of the crew recognised him. If Wardhouse was indeed on board, then he was travelling under a false name and with a forged passport.

Renny bribed one of the stewards to run through the whole ship calling out the name Wardhouse; supposedly, the captain had an important message for him. The ploy failed; nobody came forward. Meanwhile, the other passengers showered Renny and Johnny with expressions of sympathy, which were not entirely free of curiosity. They had learnt that the two belonged to Doc Savage’s group and were eager to find out more about the case Doc was currently working on. They assumed that Doc had been dealing with a ‘case’ and had met his end in the process. They could not imagine that this misfortune could have befallen him, as it were, out of the blue.

Johnny and Renny had no choice but to shut themselves away in their cabins to escape this outpouring of sympathy. The passengers didn’t believe their claims of ignorance; moreover, Johnny and Renny found it a bit tiresome to have to constantly answer questions – quite apart from the fact that they had no intention of talking about Doc Savage over and over again. The memory of him was too painful.

Disappointed, the passengers gave free rein to their imaginations, though they were not solely to blame for this; for years the tabloids had hyped up Doc Savage’s fame – much to his displeasure, incidentally – and thoroughly muddled truth and legend, so that hardly anyone

knew the true facts of the matter. The only truth in what the newspapers had published was that Doc Savage had been groomed from early childhood by an idealistic but somewhat unworldly father for the role his father intended him to play one day. Scientists from a wide variety of disciplines had endeavoured to cram the child's mind full of wisdom, whilst others had trained his muscles, so that the young Clark Savage had indeed become a sort of superman. This upbringing had cast a shadow over his entire childhood and youth, and he had rebelled on more than one occasion. Eventually, he had come to terms with it and embarked on the career path that corresponded to his father's wishes. He had learnt to compensate for the psychological scars left by this upbringing, and the drawbacks of his role as a modern-day Sir Galahad were offset by independence and wealth.

Yet neither the public nor the tabloid press were satisfied with these meagre facts. Consequently, they had attributed to Doc a fantastical origin, a fantastical past and the most fantastical of adventures.

Renny and Johnny suspected that the three remaining men in the group could be reached in New York and knew more about Wardhouse than they did. They sent out radiograms enquiring for details. But the enquiries went unanswered, as if the recipients had vanished without trace.

'That doesn't look good,' said Renny.

"We're in the dark," said Johnny in astonishingly simple terms.
"Presumably this Wardhouse is involved in the murder in one way or another…"

"Then he's also to do with the fact that Monk, Ham and Long Tom haven't been in touch," said Renny. Monk, Ham and Long Tom were the remaining members of Doc's group. "Perhaps they've been kidnapped."

Four days later, they found Thurston H. Wardhouse.

By this time, the *Regis* was not far from New York. The days had become noticeably chilly, even chillier than over the

North Atlantic in general, and eventually fog set in as well. The passengers in their deckchairs had wrapped themselves in coats and blankets.

But on that day, it suddenly turned warm in the early afternoon. The passengers shed their woollens, yet they were still sweating profusely, and below deck the temperature became so uncomfortable that no one who could leave stayed there.

The heat intensified, and the passengers sought refuge in the shade. In the salons, the fans were switched on, and the bar was inundated with requests for cool drinks. The people on board were not yet concerned.

Then one of the stewards on deck suddenly threw down his tray of whisky and lemonade, lunged at a fat man with a furious shout and tried to tip him overboard. A few sailors grabbed the steward, dragged him below deck and locked him up. The passengers were amused. Some of them knew that the fat man had been harassing the steward since Southampton, and spread the word. They explained the incident by saying that the sudden heat had affected the steward's mind, so that he no longer knew what he was doing.

They were discussing this when Thurston H. Wardhouse appeared on the scene and caused the next incident.

5.

Renny and Johnny were standing in the shade on the promenade deck. They'd left their jackets in their cabins and were wearing short-sleeved shirts, flannel trousers and tennis shoes. Renny was busy constantly wiping the sweat from his face. Johnny wasn't sweating; his gaunt, bony frame simply wasn't capable of it.

'The weather's just as mad as the steward,' declared Renny. 'If you didn't have the calendar in your head, you'd think it was July rather than November.'

"It's the sunspots," remarked Johnny wisely. "They're turning the seasons upside down."

"Probably." Renny thought for a moment. "I keep thinking about the telegram that lured us onto this ship in London. Who sent it? We assumed Doc had sent it, but perhaps it was someone else after all…"

"We'd have to make enquiries in New York," said Johnny. "We'd have to find out if it lay there for a couple of hours; then Doc might well have been the sender after all."

At that very moment, a handsome man ran across the deck towards them. His face was contorted with fear, and he seemed to be in an unusual hurry.

"Hide!" he shrieked. "Go below deck, or you'll die!"

Renny and Johnny looked at him in shock. It would never have occurred to them that they were standing face to face with Thurston H. Wardhouse; they

wouldn't have asked the handsome man about it either, had he not made his next remark.

"You've already killed Doc Savage!" he cried. "Now you're going to murder me!"

Renny and Johnny sprang into action. They caught up with the man; Renny grabbed him by the collar. Wardhouse let out a desperate howl.

"What did you just say?!" Renny demanded fiercely. "Go below deck!" the man shouted. "Quick!"

"Who are you?" Renny demanded.

"Wardhouse," the man gasped. He seemed to be beside himself with fear. "You fools, don't you realise what's going on

here?" Renny glared at the man menacingly.

"No," he said. "But we'd very much like to find out."

"The sun," Wardhouse gasped, "its rays…" He fell silent. He looked at Renny and Johnny suspiciously and tried to free himself from Renny's grip. He licked his lips and trembled.

'Carry on,' said Renny.

"We're very keen to hear what you have to say," explained Johnny. "Please do carry on with your interesting remarks."

Wardhouse tugged desperately at Renny's superhumanly large hands. Renny wouldn't let him go.

"Help!" shrieked Wardhouse. "You're going to murder me!"

Some of the crew were within earshot. Now they came even closer and eyed Renny and Johnny menacingly. Renny released Wardhouse. Wardhouse refrained from continuing his escape; suddenly, he no longer seemed distraught. Triumphantly, he looked at the sailors.

"Something's not right here," Renny declared in a grave voice. "Take us to the skipper."

The sailors had no objection; they took Johnny and Renny to the captain. Wardhouse shuffled along behind them and immediately spoke

the floor.

‘Turn the ship round at once!’ he commanded. ‘Otherwise we’ve no chance of survival.’ The captain looked at him intently and nodded. ‘It’s the heat,’ he said calmly. ‘He’s lost his mind. Lock him up with the steward.’

The sailors grabbed Wardhouse to take him away; at that very moment, a violent explosion occurred near the bow. The passengers, the captain and the crew rushed to the railing and peered forward. A gaping hole had opened up above the waterline.

‘Too late,’ said Wardhouse tonelessly. ‘There’s no need to turn back now.’

Panic broke out on the *Regis*. The passengers screamed in confusion, as if they, too, had been overcome by the climate; the officers and the captain barked out orders; the crew scrambled below deck to operate the pumps and plug the leak. Some passengers and crew members fainted. Wardhouse took advantage of the confusion to flee down a companionway.

The captain ran onto the bridge and turned the wheel himself; he had decided to follow Wardhouse’s advice.

Renny looked at Johnny. “The man knows what he’s doing,” he explained, needlessly. “We should follow him.”

“Wherever that may be,” said Johnny. “Let’s hope we can find him again. The *Regis* isn’t exactly that small, after all.”

They too hurried down. Wardhouse was no longer in sight, but they could hear his footsteps. He seemed to be heading for the engine room. Renny and Johnny followed; they were faster than Wardhouse and caught sight of him again before he could disappear into the labyrinth of the lower decks and corridors.

Wardhouse stopped and turned round. He must have realised that any further attempt to escape was pointless, for he crouched down in a flash and drew a sports pistol from a holster strapped beneath his right knee. Renny and Johnny knew that such weapons were more dangerous than they

appeared: although they were small-calibre, they had considerable stopping power. They threw themselves to one side and against the nearest door. The door was unlocked, and Renny and Johnny found themselves in one of the storerooms.

They were panting; Renny wiped the sweat from his brow. Johnny took off his glasses and massaged his good eye.

“The devil take that bloke,” he whispered.

Renny also put his hand to his eyes.

“What’s going on?” he asked, confused. “I’m suddenly seeing bright circles and dots…”

“I feel the same,” said Johnny. “It’s an unusual phenomenon, which we’re unfortunately unable to get to the bottom of for the time being.”

They thought hard.

“It’s got something to do with the heat,” Renny said at last. “Do you remember the story we read in the paper – about the silver sloop in Long Island Sound? Everyone on board was dead!”

Johnny laughed without joy.

“Of course I remember!” he said. “Do you think something like that could happen here too?”

“I don’t know any more than you do.”

Renny crept towards the door, and Johnny watched him go, feeling reassured.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

“I’m going to make sure the radio operator tells the world what’s happening here,” replied Renny. “You stay on Wardhouse’s trail, but don’t let him shoot you.”

He darted out into the corridor. Wardhouse hadn’t moved an inch. He was holding his pistol, but he didn’t fire. Only now did Renny realise that the corridor had no second exit; Wardhouse had found himself in a dead end. Renny had the impression

that Wardhouse would only shoot if he felt threatened. He hurried up the companionway onto the deck.

The radio room was near the stern on the upper deck. Renny found his way there, even though he could barely see. With every passing second, the coloured circles and dots swirling before his eyes grew brighter and more distracting; he was as if blinded.

Passengers and crew were still running about in a headless frenzy. Some were behaving as if they'd gone mad, others were as apathetic as zombies. Everywhere, people lay sprawled haphazardly on top of one another, having lost consciousness. No one paid them any attention. Everyone was preoccupied enough with their own situation.

Renny tried to stay in the shade as much as possible. He was now more or less convinced that the strange events were indeed linked to the sunspots, just as Johnny had suspected. He was drenched in sweat. As he passed a thermometer, he was astonished to find that the temperature was no higher than forty-five degrees Celsius – not exactly low, but certainly not high enough to cause such effects. So it certainly wasn't the heat alone…

There was no shade left on the final few metres to the radio cabin. Renny dashed across the sun-drenched deck, flung the door open and slammed it shut behind him, breathing a sigh of relief that he'd made it.

The two radio operators lay curled up on the floor, but they were still alive. Like all members of Doc Savage's group, Renny knew his way around radio equipment. His eye problems worsened; glowing orbs seemed to waver before his pupils. He closed his eyes and felt himself growing dizzy. He gritted his teeth and pressed the Morse key: SOS STEAMER REGIS IN UNUSUAL HEAT ZONE SOS EXPLOSION ON BOARD PROBABLY SOME DEAD ...

He heard someone enter the cabin and struggled to open his eyes. Through the swirling veils, he recognised Wardhouse. The man could barely stay on his feet and was pressing both hands against his head.

"I've made a mistake," croaked Wardhouse. "I didn't know you were with Doc Savage; I thought it… it's a…

trick …”

He collapsed and remained lying there. Renny turned back to the radio and held his left hand over his eyes. His brain felt like liquid lead. Summoning all his energy, he set to work on the Morse key again. He clung to the thought that he had to call for help; otherwise, he and the others on the ship would suffer the same fate as the people on the silver sloop.

Once again, he broke off the radio message mid-sentence. He could no longer concentrate; his head and arms suddenly seemed to weigh a hundredweight. He tried once more to pull himself together, but he couldn’t manage it. He toppled over and lost consciousness.

6.

The garbled distress call that Renny had managed to send out into the ether was not the only message reaching the outside world about the strange events on the *Regis*. Radio operators are notoriously keen to share news; moreover, they form a close-knit community. They spend a considerable portion of their downtime exchanging gossip from ship to ship.

One of *the Regis's* radio operators had also casually told a colleague on a freighter how the autumnal weather had turned into a glorious summer's day; later, he had – less casually – mentioned the explosion and other details before finally losing consciousness. It was through this roundabout route that the authorities and the newspapers had also been informed, and in New York and other cities, special editions were once again being published. Newspaper sellers were shouting out the latest sensation. The papers were literally snatched from their hands.

One of the buyers in New York hurried back so quickly to the house from which he had come that the paperboy could only catch a fleeting glimpse of him, which, however, did not bother the boy in the slightest. He was not interested in his customers, but solely in his earnings. The house was situated in a shabby neighbourhood where there were numerous cheap boarding houses, and this house, too, was a boarding house.

The man was just one metre fifty tall and almost as broad. His arms were longer than his legs and reached down to just below his knees; his chest was like a barrel and his head comparatively tiny. His face was remarkably ugly, and his hair resembled rusty nails. Behind his low forehead, no impartial observer would have suspected more than two ounces of brain, yet in fact the

man was one of the most accomplished chemists in the United States. His full name was Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, but most people called him Monk.

He went into one of the rooms at the guesthouse, sat down at the table and studied the newspaper.

'Ham!' he called out after a while in a high-pitched voice that was in stark contrast to his burly frame. 'Come here!'

'What's up, my ugly friend?' asked a mocking voice from the next room. 'What can I do for you?'

"Spare me your platitudes," said Monk grumpily. "Something's happened."

A wiry and very elegant man emerged from the adjoining room. Ham was merely his nickname. His name was Theodore Marley Brooks; he was one of the shrewdest lawyers ever to have passed his exams at Harvard, and he took no small pride in the fact that he'd risen to the rank of brigadier-general during the war. He had a quirk of always carrying a walking stick, even though walking sticks had long since gone out of fashion and he was, for the rest, very much a man of fashion. In reality, the stick was a concealed rapier, and the tip had been dipped in a chemical that, at the slightest injury, would send the victim into an almost immediate slumber.

Monk handed him the newspaper, and Ham too studied the article about the misfortune that had befallen the *Regis*.

'Embarrassing,' he said at last, lowering the paper. 'So Renny and Johnny have unwittingly courted disaster.'

'We ought to do something,' Monk urged him. 'But what?'

"That's the question," said Ham. "Besides, we're supposed to stay here until we're recalled, and if we fall into the hands of reporters, they'll want to know what we, as Doc Savage's friends, think of his sudden demise."

"We can't worry about the reporters," Monk retorted irritably. "The fact that *Regis* is in danger seems more important to me than anything else."

They argued for a while, then Monk at least managed to get his way insofar as they left the house. They put on raincoats and turned up their collars to hide their faces a little; they also pulled on wide-brimmed hats. They went through a back door to a garage and got into a taxi. Ham clambered behind the wheel, whilst Monk climbed into the back seat and played the passenger.

On the journey to the harbour, they carried on arguing. They had a habit of bickering whenever they had the chance, and anyone listening to them would inevitably come to the conclusion that they were bitter enemies. In truth, they were as inseparable as Siamese twins. If one was ill, the other suffered; moreover, they had saved each other's lives more than once. Arguing had become so second nature to them that they scarcely noticed it anymore.

In a narrow, run-down street, Ham stopped the car in front of a gloomy gateway. They walked through the gateway to a door, bickering incessantly as if they were being paid to do so. Monk unlocked the door, let Ham in and locked it behind him.

'Be very quiet!' said a sharp, metallic voice. 'Please don't turn on the light.'

Ham and Monk came to an abrupt halt. It was so dark inside the house that they couldn't have seen their own hands in front of their eyes. Their bickering ceased just as abruptly. Voices could be heard from somewhere; what they were saying was inaudible from where Ham and Monk were standing.

At last the indistinct conversation died away, and Ham and Monk dared to breathe again.

"That's it," said the man who had asked them not to turn on the light and to keep quiet. "Why have you come here?"

"Something's happened at the *Regis*," explained Monk. "It's in the paper; I've brought it with me."

A thin torch flared to life; the newspaper was taken from Monk's hand, then the beam of light swept across the paper.

'Why do we have to sit in the dark?' asked Monk quietly.

“The shutters don’t close properly,” replied the man with the metallic voice. “I want to make sure the gang in the house next door doesn’t realise anyone lives here.”

Monk laughed.

“Do those blokes suspect anything yet?” he wanted to know.

“At any rate, they haven’t let on so far.”

“Have they brought that Derek Flammen back?” Ham interjected.

“Not yet,” said the man. “It took us quite a while to track down the cars we’d marked with the phosphorescent liquid. They led us to this hideout, but there were only five men and Velma Crale there.”

“Half a success,” Ham stated matter-of-factly. “One mustn’t be presumptuous.”

“We stuck a microphone to the wall,” said the man, “and set up a receiver here. From the conversations we’ve been listening in on, it’s clear that the men are waiting for the boss to return. They’re to stay until he arrives.”

“And he hasn’t turned up,” remarked Monk.

“Not yet,” said the man. “They’ve been waiting for nearly five days and are gradually growing impatient.”

Monk sighed.

“Do we still not know what this is all about?” he asked.

“Not yet,” replied the man.

“What are we going to do about the *Regis*?” Ham interjected once more.

“We’ll wrap this up here,” said the man. “We’ll grab the girl and the bandits who’ve captured her, load them up and fly to *the Regis*.”

“Well,” said Monk, “but then the bandits will realise that Doc Savage isn’t dead.”

“Perhaps we can avoid that.”

The people in the neighbouring house were talking again, and Doc Savage listened intently to what was coming through the radio.

“It’s all trivial,” he finally decided. “We won’t wait any longer.”

He switched off the radio and walked ahead of Monk and Ham towards the door. In the darkness, they climbed a flight of stairs.

“If people find out you’re not dead,” said Monk, “they’ll be quite surprised.”

“And they won’t understand why you pretended to be dead,” said Ham. “I don’t quite understand it myself, for that matter.”

Doc stopped and turned to face his companions.

“The fact that the bomb didn’t kill me is down solely to my caution,” he said. ‘I’d withdrawn to the library and operated the X-ray machine via a remote control. Whoever sent the bomb must have reckoned that I’d check the parcel before opening it. The bomb was rigged in such a way that it was bound to detonate under X-ray radiation.’

“I realise that,” said Monk. “But that still leaves the question of your motives. Why did you pretend to be dead?”

“Some police officers knew, of course, that I was still alive,” replied Doc Savage. “The bluff was intended primarily for the man to whom I owe this incident. As long as he believes me to be dead, he won’t plan any further attacks, and I can move about undisturbed to put a stop to him if possible.”

Ham and Monk were satisfied with this explanation. They followed Doc up the stairs. At the top, Doc opened a skylight. The roof was flat and surrounded by a low wall. The three men climbed through the hatch, and Doc pulled a pair of wire cutters from his pocket.

“I really hope this trick works,” said Ham.

“Why not?” Monk was indignant. “I built the contraption myself!”

“That’s exactly why,” said Ham sarcastically. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have any doubts.”

“I’m not very technically gifted,” Monk admitted. “Neither are you, for that matter, so we’ve got nothing to hold against each other. But this setup is so simple that even you could have installed it. All you need to do is cut the wire up here, and a record will start playing on the ground floor. It’s connected to a loudspeaker and …”

He didn’t get any further, for a commotion broke out downstairs. Doc had cut a cable that ran across the roof and down through the hatch. Voices shouted in a jumble, then wood seemed to splinter as if a door were being kicked in.

“Police!” someone bellowed. “Come out—the house is surrounded, and the back door is under guard too! You don’t stand a chance!”

Monk laughed.

“I made all that noise all by myself,” he said. “Aren’t I a brilliant actor?”

“You certainly are,” said Doc. “Come on.”

The three men climbed over the wall onto the roof of the neighbouring house and took cover behind a row of chimneys. Doc pulled a flat box out of his pocket. It resembled a cigarette case and had a round button on the side. He placed his thumb on the button, aimed the box at another roof hatch and waited.

The roar of the loudspeaker could still be heard from the ground floor, and a police siren seemed to be drawing nearer in the distance. A harsh voice bellowed orders.

“Well, there you go,” said Monk with satisfaction. “There they are.”

The skylight had swung open; a man squeezed through it. He looked around anxiously and headed for the neighbouring building, where there appeared to be an emergency exit. Doc Savage pressed the button; a faint hissing sound could be heard. The man stood rooted to the spot, turned sluggishly on his heel and collapsed.

A second man appeared at the skylight. He was less nervous than his predecessor. He leaned over the skylight and held out his hand.

‘Don’t get worked up,’ he said in a low voice. ‘They won’t catch us; we’re too cunning for that.’

“That would be a shame,” replied a woman’s voice. “At this stage of the operation, I can’t do with the police.”

Velma Crale came into view. She was no longer tied up and didn’t behave like a prisoner either. Behind her, three more men were crawling out of the hatch.

“I don’t understand a thing!” exclaimed the girl. “How did the cops manage to find us here?” None of the men said a word. Once again, Doc Savage pressed the button on the flat box; once again, a faint hissing sound rang out, and Velma Crale’s companions fell onto the roof one after the other and lay motionless. The young woman finally seemed to realise what was happening.

“An air pistol!” she said, startled, and more to herself, for none of the bodyguards were listening. “Darts…!”

She spun round and took off running. Doc darted out from behind the fireplace and caught up with her before she reached the other building. Velma Crale struggled desperately, then suddenly let her arms drop and gave up.

“I surrender,” she said meekly. “It seems I’m in right up to my neck in trouble.”

Monk and Ham attended to the men lying around on the roof. None of them were conscious. Monk and Ham pulled the hypodermic needles out of their bodies – the ones Doc had fired from the concealed air pistol. The needles were soaked in an anaesthetic and were custom-made. They cost five dollars apiece, so it was well worth retrieving them.

Afterwards, Ham went over to the girl and stood before her triumphantly. He put his hands on his hips and grinned.

‘You’re a bit too slick for my liking,’ he said casually. ‘Why?’ Velma looked up at him with an innocent flick of her eyes. ‘How am I supposed to

please?"

"We thought you were a captive," explained Ham. "And now it turns out you're part of the gang."

"Oh my God!" said the girl, dumbfounded. "You must be one of those people who believe everything they see."

"Definitely!" said Ham. "You can save the act—you won't pull that one off with us."

Velma paid him no further attention, but turned to Doc Savage, who was watching her with a stony expression. She became a little flustered.

"I was held captive," she said earnestly. "Those blokes let me go. I wasn't meant to fall into the hands of the police."

Ham laughed scornfully. The girl turned on him and kicked out at him. Doc gave her a slight shove, so that she suddenly needed both legs to keep her balance. She lunged at Doc and tried to bite him. He kept her at a distance, and Velma ceased her futile attack.

"Tell us what this is really all about," Doc suggested. He smiled coolly. "But of course, only if you don't mind."

She let out a shrill giggle.

"I do mind!" she declared at the top of her voice. "I'd lose more money than the Rockefellers have ever seen in one go."

"I suppose we've got no choice," said Ham drawling, "but to give the young lady a proper thrashing!"

Velma stopped giggling and looked at Ham seriously.

"I'd rather you didn't!" she warned. "You'd regret it!"

Doc Savage hoisted her up with a jerk, tucked her under his arm and climbed over to the other roof. He carried Velma through the gateway onto the street and shoved her into the taxi. No one was watching the scene; the street was deserted. Velma struggled furiously, but she was careful not to scream, either because she was afraid of the police or of Ham. Doc waited until

Ham and Monk had fetched the sleeper men from the roof and stowed them in the car as well.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’m going back in.”

Doc climbed back onto the roof and over the wall onto the second building. He entered the house through the hatch through which Velma and the bandits had come. It was as deserted as the neighbouring building where he himself had found lodgings. He suspected that the houses were due to be demolished and were therefore standing empty.

He found the rooms where the men and the girl had been staying. They were dirty, untidy and sparsely furnished. There was a pungent smell of cigarette smoke and burnt food. He discovered nothing of significance and therefore turned his attention to the fingerprints scattered everywhere. He couldn’t photograph them because he didn’t have the equipment, but he could at least dust them with powder to make them visible. He committed them to memory and was certain he wouldn’t forget them for the time being. His trained mind could store information like a computer.

He returned to the street once more. The car was a little overcrowded, but the unconscious men let themselves be crammed in. Monk was already sitting at the wheel.

‘Where to?’ he asked.

“To my place,” said Doc, squeezing in beside him. “We’re going to interrogate our prisoners.”

“But what about the *Regis*?” asked Ham.

“The interrogation won’t take long,” replied Doc. “Afterwards, we’ll fly to the steamer. A few hours more or less won’t make any difference now.”

Monk drove the car through the streets at breakneck speed. He would have loved to drive with his blue lights flashing, he was in such a hurry, but he didn’t have any, and doing so in a taxi would only have made him stand out in an unpleasant way. He thanked his lucky stars that the roads weren’t as crowded at this time of day as they were in the mornings and just after the end of the working day.

He steered the car into the underground car park, the existence of which was known only to a select few, and unloaded his cargo. By now, the men whom Doc had shot with syringes had regained enough consciousness to stay on their feet. Velma Crale followed along grumpily.

Doc had had an express lift fitted in the high-rise at his own expense and, accompanied by his men, reached the eighty-sixth floor without being noticed by the porters or lift operators. He unlocked the heavy steel door to his flat and led the way into the reception room, which was undamaged; it had escaped unscathed from the explosion. Monk and Ham herded the prisoners along in front of them.

The reception room was furnished with a large inlaid table, several armchairs, a safe and a huge, precious carpet. Monk and Ham shove their prisoners into the armchairs, then Ham looked around anxiously.

'Where's Long Tom?' he asked. 'Shouldn't he be here?'

Long Tom, also known as Major Thomas J. Roberts, was the fifth man in Doc Savage's group. He was an electronics expert and looked notoriously sickly, as if he'd spent a considerable part of his life behind hospital walls. He wasn't very tall and was a bit slight, yet he held his own in a fight – something his opponents had discovered time and again, much to their surprise – and had never been ill. Monk and Ham had left him behind when they'd holed up in the guesthouse from which they'd driven to Doc Savage's to inform him of the events on the *Regis*.

"Long Tom!" cried Monk.

Doc Savage suddenly sprang into action. He shoved Monk and Ham towards the door leading into the library and knocked them to the floor. Standing at the entrance to the laboratory were several men with grim faces and menacing-looking pistols.

7.

One of the men coming out of the laboratory had armed himself with a chair. Doc tried to close the door to the library behind him; at that very moment, the man hurled the chair. He seemed to have practised this trick many times. The chair fell in such a way that it blocked the door. The men followed the chair and braced themselves against the door. Doc pushed against it from the inside. “Monk! Ham!” he shouted. “The submachine guns!”

Monk and Ham sprang to their feet and drew the submachine guns they were carrying under their jackets. The weapons were not much larger than ordinary pistols, but had a long, curved magazine. Doc had designed them himself and had them built to his specifications. They had the rate of fire of a machine gun and were not available on the open market.

Monk and Ham fired through the crack in the door; the gangsters recoiled and sought cover in the laboratory; at the same time, there was a pounding on the front door.

‘Open up and come out!’ bellowed a gruff voice. ‘Or you’ll witness a miracle!’

“Ha!” roared Monk. “Just stick your noses in here, and *you’ll* have your miracle!”

Ham ran to the television, which was positioned so that the corridor could be seen from inside the flat. He flicked a switch and saw that the group outside the door had a man with them who was bound and gagged. The man was as pale as if he’d grown up in a cellar, and had sad eyes and a frail build.

“They’ve caught Long Tom!” said Ham, dumbfounded. “One of the blokes is holding a knife to his throat!”

The leader of the men outside the door had heard him.

“That’s right!” he said cheerfully. “And if you don’t comply, we’ll cut him to pieces!”

‘Stop!’ cried Doc. ‘If we open the door, will he be all right?’

“You could put it that way,” said the leader at the door.

Doc left the library, walked through the reception room and opened the door. Monk and Ham stayed in the library. The men came in, also holding guns in their hands. The second group in the laboratory did not move for the time being. Doc raised his arms and walked backwards towards the table with the glass top.

The men who had captured Long Tom stopped at the door. As before, one of them held a knife to Long Tom’s throat. Long Tom looked at Doc and wore a guilty expression.

‘All right,’ said one of the intruders loudly. ‘We’ve won.’

Derek Flammen emerged from the laboratory. He was grinning from ear to ear and had a revolver in each fist. “Marvellous!” he said. “That’s what I call progress!”

Doc Savage fixed his gaze on Flammen; his golden eyes shimmered.

“Are you responsible for this raid?” he asked.

Flammen surveyed the prisoners and Velma Crale. “That’s right,” he said. “And I advise you to abandon any tricks!”

“Flammen,” said Doc calmly, “what part do you really play in this affair?”

Flammen’s reply was clear and precise.

“I’ve been dragged into this through no fault of my own,” he said with utter conviction. “I didn’t even know what it was all about. I’ve learnt a thing or two in the meantime, though I’m still not fully informed. But I know that several million dollars are at stake, and that interests me.”

Velma Crale laughed spitefully.

‘You’re in for a disappointment,’ she said bitingly. ‘You’re not cut out for this sort of affair.’ Seemingly casually, Doc Savage let his arms drop and pressed down on one of the inlays on the large table. A whooshing sound could be heard, then a wall of shatterproof glass descended between him and the men at the door.

“You’re underhand!” said Flammen, exasperated. “I warned you to stop your tricks!”

His companions lost their nerve and fired at the pane; the bullets ricocheted off it, putting the shooters themselves in danger. Flammen ordered them in a shrill voice to cease fire. Long Tom, standing near the door, looked even more forlorn than he had a few minutes earlier. The men in the laboratory now advanced in turn, but they did not fire. They weren’t sure whether there might also be an invisible wall between them and Doc’s group.

Before they’d quite realised that nothing could happen to them – apart from Hams’ and Monk’s submachine guns, which, admittedly, were also not without danger to the shooters in this situation – Doc had set off a veritable fireworks display. His reception room was fitted with numerous technical gadgets, as he always had to be prepared for the possibility that a seemingly harmless visitor might suddenly turn out to be an enemy out to kill him. The gadgets had saved him more than once. Now, with a press of another inlay on the table, he triggered a cascade of flashes. From the ceiling, the walls and the corners, a blinding light shone with a painful intensity; the intruders closed their eyes, dazzled, and when they could see again, Doc, Ham, Monk and even Long Tom had vanished. The glass wall was no longer there, and it seemed Doc had left the flat to the intruders.

Velma Crale regained her composure. She leapt to her feet and ran for the door. The gangsters gave chase, but she was quicker. Derek Flammen was now losing his nerve too. He was prepared for further tricks and had no desire to discover them all.

‘Come on,’ he said to the men who hadn’t run after Velma Crale. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

They took the lifts down to the ground floor, taking their captured accomplices with them. Downstairs, Flammen disabled the lifts by switching off the fuses. The lights went out throughout the building, so that Doc could no longer pursue the gangsters, even if he’d wanted to.

Doc Savage, Monk, Ham and the distraught Long Tom had hidden in an alcove in the library. They were convinced that Flammen and his gang would follow them; just in case, they had prepared a hot welcome with their submachine guns. In fact, Doc was a little surprised that Flammen had taken to his heels so quickly.

He had no intention of chasing after him. At that moment, the fate of the *Regis* was more important. The raid had already cost him more time than he had reckoned he would need to interrogate the prisoners.

The men waited until the light came back on, then returned to the reception room to survey the damage. The walls bore a few bullet holes; that was all. Nevertheless, Doc reluctantly accepted that renovation was inevitable, for, after all, the laboratory was still a pile of rubble. He decided to postpone the renovation for a little while longer.

“We’re off,” he said. “Long Tom, you’re staying here, but don’t let yourself be caught off guard again.”

“I certainly won’t.” Long Tom gave a pitiful grin. “I wouldn’t have fallen for it this time either, but the blokes introduced themselves as building inspectors. They claimed they wanted to check something. I’ve forgotten what it was, and besides, it was a lie. They even showed me police badges. Either they were fake or stolen. By the time I realised they’d tricked me, I was already on the floor.”

Doc smiled and said nothing. Together with Ham and Monk, he took the express lift down to the underground car park. There they got into an unassuming saloon car whose appearance was deceptive. Hidden beneath the plain bonnet was an unusually powerful engine; the windows were made of bulletproof glass, and the bodywork was also armoured.

Doc took the wheel himself. Now the streets were even more deserted than before. The three men drove to the Hudson River and to a warehouse belonging to a certain 'Hidalgo Trading Co.'. This company existed only on paper; its sole shareholder was Doc Savage, and the warehouse was in fact a hangar where he kept his aeroplanes, a few motorboats and a small airship.

'I don't understand a thing,' Monk declared once again. 'What's this all about, and who are we really dealing with?'

"I have my suspicions," explained Ham. "The whole thing seems to be gradually coming into focus."

"Oh, really?" Monk was astonished.

"In my view, we're dealing with three gangs, all chasing after the same object, whatever that object may be," Ham elaborated. He relished the fact that, once again, he knew more than his arch-enemy; or so he imagined. "One gang is led by this Velma Crale; the head of the second is likely to be Derek Flammen. We've yet to establish who's in charge of the third."

"I could have come up with that sort of nonsense myself," said Monk unkindly. "It's not enough just to have an opinion; you have to be able to back it up, and that's where your theories seem to fall short."

"Oh, you blunder of nature!" said Ham, offended. "I'd bet…"

"Better not." Doc intervened before the argument between his companions took a nasty turn again. "You might lose the bet. We'll take the large flying boat; it isn't particularly fast, but it's quite stable."

"Yes," said Monk. "We might encounter rough seas."

"Certainly not!" Ham objected categorically. "From what we've heard, the *Regis* had splendid weather—warm and sunny."

"So what?" said Monk. "Things might have changed in the meantime."

8.

The ships that had picked up the *Regis's SOS* signal were doing their best to rush to the steamer's aid, but they were making only slow progress. The weather had taken a turn within an hour. A storm was raging over the Atlantic.

The captains couldn't make sense of it, as the barometers consistently showed high pressure, and a change was highly unlikely. This, however, did nothing to alter the reality of the situation. Waves as high as houses, with foaming crests, were towering up; the wind was already almost hurricane-force; rain was falling; and from time to time there was lightning and thunder.

The ships relayed information about the weather conditions. Monk sat at the radio and took notes. He was pleased that he had at least been right on this point; at the same time, he was dismayed. He did not find it pleasant to land a seaplane in such choppy seas. He picked up the news that two Coastguard seaplanes, which had been heading for the *Regis*, were turning back. Apparently, journalists and photographers were also on their way to the steamer in other aircraft. They too would have to turn back, however much they would have liked to capitalise on the sensation.

'In this storm, you can't even stick your head out of the window,' remarked Monk sourly. 'You'd be scalped in an instant.'

Ham remained silent. He was green in the face, but not because Monk's scepticism had proved well-founded, but because he was suffering from air sickness. Generally speaking, he was quite resilient, and it took quite a lot for him to feel sick.

Doc was a skilled pilot, but he needed all his considerable skill to keep from losing control of the aircraft. He was wearing headphones so he could follow the news as well, but after a while he took them off because nothing but a roar was coming through the airwaves. Monk gritted his teeth and stayed tuned in.

'Any news from the *Regis*?' asked Ham after a while.

"Nothing," said Monk. "No news is sometimes bad news."

The men strained their eyes, scanning the horizon, and at last they spotted the ship. The steamer sat low in the water, taking the waves as they came; it appeared to be adrift. Water was sloshing over the decks. Faint smoke was billowing from the funnels. There was no sign of anyone on board.

"So there it is," said Monk, taking off his headphones as well.
"And how do we get on board now?"

Doc pushed the throttle down further. He kept a sharp lookout. He circled the ship; if anyone was still alive on board, they must have heard the engines. Yet no one stirred.

"We'll parachute down," Doc said at last. "Ham will stay here and pick us up later, if possible."

"With pleasure," said Ham with a wry smile, "but not 'if possible', rather only *'if* at all possible'…"

He took the control stick whilst Doc and Monk put on their parachute packs. Jumping in this wind wasn't exactly easy, but they managed it without being blown over the railing. Monk jumped first. As soon as he felt the deck beneath his feet, he unhooked his parachute and let it fly. Doc landed straight after him. His parachute also went overboard.

Up close, Doc and Monk could see that there were still people on the ship after all. They were lying scattered across the decks, most of them near the superstructure, but they weren't moving.

'All dead,' said Monk quietly. 'We're too late.' Slowly they made their way towards the middle of the ship and looked around. Doc stepped up to one of the dead bodies and

examined him. His face took on a very pensive expression.

‘The man’s got sunburn,’ Monk remarked pointlessly.
“And that in November!”

“The cause of death isn’t immediately apparent,” said Doc. “We should have brought instruments with us, but with all the commotion Derek Flammen and his lot caused, I forgot.”

Monk eyed him critically from the side. It wasn’t often that Doc made a mistake, and it was even rarer for him to admit it.

“But you must have a theory,” said Monk. “What could he have died of?”

“Of course I have a theory,” said Doc. “The man looks as if he’s suffered from sunstroke.”

Monk scratched behind his ears thoughtfully. He looked out at the deck, where in some places the caulking between the planks had been forced out.

“That reminds me of the Silver Sloop,” he said vaguely. “If the newspapers are to be believed, it looked much the same there.”

“More or less.” Doc nodded. “I’m afraid we can rely on the newspapers this time.”

On their way to the saloon, they found more bodies, but Doc didn’t bother to examine them any further. The saloon stretched across the entire width of the ship and had evidently been hastily converted into a sick bay. It wasn’t immediately clear whether the people lying on the divans and in the armchairs pushed together were still alive. Most of them were wearing white bandages over their eyes.

Doc and Monk stopped and looked around in astonishment. A man rose from one of the armchairs and walked towards them, feeling his way unsteadily. He was tall and gaunt, and scarcely less sunburnt than the dead on deck. He, too, had a blindfold over his eyes. He removed the blindfold and blinked.

‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘How did you manage to escape this infernal heatwave?’

Doc introduced himself and Monk. The man grimaced as if in pain and wrapped the blindfold round his head again. He peered out from beneath it through a narrow slit.

“It was absolutely dreadful,” he said. “I’m at a loss for words to describe what happened. My name is Ward; I’m one of the stewards. Is there anything I can tell you?”

“Tell me,” said Doc. “From the very beginning.”

The man recounted the strange heatwave and the behaviour of the passengers and crew.

“It just got worse and worse,” he concluded. “The heat, I mean. At its peak, I think everyone on board was unconscious. Then the heat gradually subsided.”

“How long did it take for the temperature to return to normal?” asked Doc Savage.

“Quite a while,” said the man. “In fact, it’s still warm, but the heatwave that knocked us all off our feet was over almost in the blink of an eye.”

“Have you seen a certain Thurston H. Wardhouse?” Doc enquired.

“No,” said the man.

“And I suppose you didn’t come across my two companions, Renny and Johnny, either?”

“Yes,” said the man. “They were on board, but by the time it was all over and I’d come round, I hadn’t seen them any more.”

Monk noticed how worried Doc was, even though he was trying not to let it show. Ward led the two men through the ship, whilst Doc and Monk kept an eye out for Renny, Johnny and Wardhouse – though they didn’t even have a description of the latter.

By necessity, the search remained somewhat superficial. To search a passenger steamer thoroughly takes at least a week, and even then you can't be sure you've really shone a light into every nook and cranny. Doc and Monk found neither Renny, nor Johnny, nor Wardhouse, but they did make some surprising discoveries.

On one occasion, the compass needle stopped pointing north. It spun back and forth seemingly aimlessly, as if the North Pole had lost its magnetic pull. They also realised that there were, after all, survivors on board, though they were paralysed as if by shock and unresponsive. And finally, they discovered that the effects of the heatwave had been confined to the outer areas of *the Regis*. The stokers in the engine room, for example, had only sweated a little more profusely than usual, but none of them had fainted.

After an hour, Doc called off the search. "It seems Renny and Johnny are either dead or no longer on board," he said grimly. "We're just wasting time here."

'No longer on board…', Monk repeated mechanically. 'But how on earth could they have got down here?'

Doc did not address the question, as was his habit when he did not know the answer or was not yet certain of its correctness. Generally speaking, he kept his theories and hypotheses to himself until he could prove them. In this way, he avoided having to be corrected and having to demonstrate to those around him that he, too, was fallible.

'To examine the ship, we'd need specialised equipment,' he said. 'Above all, we'd have to analyse the heatwave, and that's completely out of the question at the moment. We'll telegraph Long Tom to bring us our equipment; that'll be quicker than having Ham fly back to fetch it.'

Monk peered upwards, where Ham was idly circling in the air. The storm had not abated, and Monk realised how difficult it must be to keep the aeroplane on course.

"Yes," he said lamely, "that'll certainly be quicker…"

Ward showed Doc and Monk the way to the radio cabin. Once again, he took off the eye patch and put it in his pocket. His eyesight seemed

to be improving by the minute.

“I was lucky,” he said, without anyone having asked him. “I was below deck the whole time. I was setting the tables in the dining room. Normally I hate setting tables, but I’ll never complain about it again. That task probably saved my life.”

Doc glanced briefly at the radio equipment; it seemed to be in working order. Then he turned his attention to the two telegraph operators lying on the floor. They were dead. A broken inkwell lay on its side.

“It was probably on the table,” said Doc, pointing to the inkwell. “One of the radio operators knocked it over when he fell.”

“Probably,” muttered Ward absently. “Does it matter?”

Monk had already realised what Doc was getting at. Someone had accidentally dipped their hand into the ink puddle on the floorboards, leaving a handprint behind. Apparently, the hand was enormous.

“Bloody hell!” Monk exclaimed shrillly. “Renny!”

“That’s right,” said Doc simply.

“So he was with the radio operators,” Monk stated, needlessly. “But he’s not there any more.”

Doc tuned the radio to the wavelength he usually used to contact his companions; he was convinced that Long Tom had switched the set to receive on the eighty-sixth floor of the skyscraper in New York. He sent a message and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. He immediately recognised the style of the man on the other end of the radio; it was terse, energetic and without frills. Doc regretted that he couldn’t establish voice contact with Long Tom—the weather conditions were too poor for that—but he had no doubt that he was dealing with Long Tom. Every experienced radio operator develops distinctive traits over time that are unmistakable.

“*Go to the* warehouse,” Doc telegraphed. “*Take crates fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, seventy-three and eighty-six. Load them onto a plane and take them to Regis*.”

"*Roger*," replied Long Tom.

"Any news?"

"*Nothing of note*," replied Long Tom. *"The police and journalists have been snooping around, but they've gone off again now. The press have been asking loads of questions about whether you're really dead. The police wanted to know what's become of you*."

"When can you come?" asked Doc.

"As soon as possible," replied Long Tom.

Doc switched off the device and turned round. He was surprised to find that the steward was no longer there.

"Where's he gone?" he asked,

"He's made a discreet exit," Monk grinned. "Perhaps he didn't want to stick his nose into our private affairs."

Doc and Monk left the cabin to look for Renny and Johnny once more. Until Long Tom arrived from New York with the equipment, they had nothing better to do.

9.

The helpful steward Ward was lurking some distance away behind one of the fans, watching Doc and Monk. He waited until they were out of sight, then hurried back to the radio room. He shut the door behind him and bolted it.

He too ran to the radio and tuned it to a different wavelength. He was no less an experienced radio operator than Doc and Long Tom, which didn't quite fit with his supposed profession.

He received a reply immediately.

"*Savage and Monk are on* board," Ward radioed. *"Luckily I was here and was able to meet them. Long Tom is due to join them from New York; we'll have to do something about that*."

"Quite right," replied his partner. "Hold on a moment, I'll ask Glass Eye."

The so-called steward sat down on a chair and lit a cigarette. A few minutes later, the partner was back on the line.

"*You're to make contact with Long Tom*," he morse-signalled. *"Make sure he flies south-southeast from the lightship Montauk. If he sees us, he's to come down. We'll take care of him*."

"Roger," Ward telegraphed.

"Hold on," the partner radioed. *"Glasauge's just come up with something; you should hear it*."

A rapid series of dots and dashes came through the headphones; Ward listened intently. He grinned; his grin grew wider and wider.

"Roger," he radioed once more. "*Over*."

Once more he tuned into a different frequency – the one Doc had used to confer with Long Tom. He breathed a sigh of relief when Long Tom came on the air. Ward had feared Long Tom might have already left the house.

"What's going on?" Long Tom asked.

"There are new instructions," replied Ward, the steward.

"But you're not Doc," replied Long Tom.

"Monk *here*," Ward telegraphed. *"I slipped and sprained my hand. I hope you can still decipher my message*."

"*Roger*," Long Tom morse-signalled. *"What about the instructions?*"

"*Fly from the light vessel Montauk towards* south-southeast," Ward informed him. *"You'll see a flashing light that's constantly morse-signalling 'DOC'. Head down to the water and wait until you're picked up. The ship looks a bit unusual, but you've got nothing to fear*."

"What's happened?" asked Long Tom.

"A lot," replied Ward. *"I can't explain it to you now; it would be too complicated. Don't go to the Regis, because Doc and I aren't there any more. If nothing goes wrong, we'll have the case sorted out soon*."

"*Roger*," Long Tom replied. "*Over*."

Ward laughed and switched off the radio.

Ward had clearly taken on a great deal, and he could only hope that Doc and Monk wouldn't happen to come across the radio room again. He went over to the second set and thought hard.

"SOS," he finally telegraphed. "*Doc Savage is alive. He is responsible for the raid on the Regis. He killed the people on the Regis with a new machine; send help immediately. SOS*."

He left the radio switched on, as if he'd fainted whilst working. He grabbed one of the dead radio operators and sat him on the chair in front of the set, then moistened the dried ink on the floor with his saliva, dipped the index finger of the second radio operator into it and wrote on the floor: DOC SAVAGE HAS ...

He smudged the last letter, as if the radio operator had lost his strength mid-sentence, and stepped back to admire his handiwork. He slid the bolt back and stepped out onto the deck.

He stopped and peered upwards. The aircraft, with Ham at the control stick, which had been circling incessantly, was neither to be seen nor heard. He walked through the ship until he found Doc and Monk.

'The storm is abating,' he said wisely, although there was no sign of it yet. 'Perhaps we'll be rescued after all.'

'Let's hope the storm eases!' said Monk. 'If the weather improves, Long Tom will find his way to us more quickly. I'm sure he's already on his way.'

At that very moment, Long Tom was indeed on his way. He was flying over the Hudson River and heading out to sea. The aircraft he had chosen was not an amphibious plane, such as Doc and his men preferred to use, but a genuine flying boat—neither elegant nor manoeuvrable, but so robust that it could cope even with a choppy sea.

Had Long Tom set off a quarter of an hour later, he would have seen the special editions of the newspapers, which reported on the *Regis's* SOS call in as much detail as was possible given the scant information available. For the headlines, the printers had dug out of their drawers the largest typefaces that hadn't been used for years, and the newsboys on the street corners were shouting the sensational news: DOC SAVAGE IS ALIVE! REGIS LINER ATTACKED! Doc
Savage allegedly responsible for the murders!

Once again, journalists, photographers, police officers and coastguard personnel boarded aeroplanes to rush to the *Regis*. The steamships, too, were once more making their way with all their might towards the scene of the accident. Meanwhile, the storm was indeed subsiding.

Long Tom was oblivious to all this. He had tuned his radio to the wavelength that Doc and his companions usually used, so he did not hear the news reports describing Doc Savage's alleged crime.

Long Tom had no trouble locating the light vessel *Montauk* and set a course south-southeast. Using his binoculars, he scanned the sea for the flashing signals he was to look out for. He was not far south of the *Regis*, but he was no longer interested in the steamer. He was concerned only with the agreed signal.

After a while, he spotted it. The light was unusually bright, as if from a powerful searchlight, and it seemed to be shining on a ship. He couldn't make out the vessel's contours clearly; it was too dark for that. The moon hadn't risen, and the starlight wasn't bright enough. There were no clouds in sight.

Long Tom circled low around the searchlight; it was not switched off, even though the men below must have noticed the aeroplane by now. He decided to repay this treachery with treachery. He dropped a flare attached to a parachute and opened his eyes wide in astonishment. The ship's outline was now visible; it resembled a long, steel cigar, yet at the same time he was quite certain that what lay before him was not a submarine.

He forced himself not to dwell on it any further. He landed the aeroplane on the water and headed towards the strange craft. The swell was still considerable, which, to his regret, he only realised now. He had to summon all his skill to prevent the aircraft from sinking into the sea.

The unusual craft was heading towards him. The searchlight was no longer pointed upwards, but at the seaplane. Blinded, Long Tom closed his eyes and swore. He suspected that Doc had got himself mixed up with a bunch of fools who couldn't even operate a searchlight properly.

When he opened his eyes again and squinted into the light, it had drawn much closer than he had expected. The craft seemed not only to be of an unusual design, but also to be unusually fast.

Then the craft was right in front of him; a fraction of a second later, the flying boat was rammed. Long Tom had already unbuckled his seatbelt and was swept from his seat by the impact. One

wing touched the water; the flying boat lost its balance and capsized.

Long Tom struggled through the emergency exit and swallowed water. He surfaced and found himself trapped between the aeroplane and the ship. The situation left little room for complicated thought, but Long Tom realised that the accident was no coincidence; he also realised that Doc Savage was not on the ship and that he had been set up.

10.

Doc Savage stood on the bridge of *the Regis* and also activated a searchlight. He kept sending out SOS signals in Morse code, but he had no intention of calling for help. The signals were meant for Ham. Doc wanted to show him where the steamer was, which he could barely make out from above in the darkness. Monk stood beside Doc; Steward Ward had once again gone off on his own and was in the bar.

“Ham isn’t answering,” said Monk, looking worried. “Nothing’s happened to him, has it?”

Doc eyed him suspiciously from the side. It wasn’t often that Ham and Monk spoke to each other in such gentle tones. Monk looked down at the floor, embarrassed.

The sound of an engine could be heard in the distance, growing louder by the second. An aeroplane emerged from the night. Monk squinted.

“That’s not Ham,” he said pitifully. “I bet we’ll have the press or the coastguard on our backs any minute now!”

But he was wrong. Ham was in the plane, and he was racing low over the water with his position lights on. They went out and flared up again; Ham was sending a Morse code message.

“Oh, bloody hell!” said Monk. His face grew even more gloomy, but now for different reasons. He’d understood the message, and now that Ham was safe, their old animosity had resurfaced. “So Ham was actually useful for once – who’d have thought it of him…”

Doc abandoned the searchlight, turned on his heel and headed for the bar. Monk trotted after him. Ward was just about to pour himself a double whisky. Doc grabbed him by the collar without a word.

“Ham intercepted your radio messages, you scoundrel!” Monk ranted. “He had that ship from his lost , but just he he’s come round and winked at us all!’

Ward choked; he couldn’t breathe. Doc loosened his grip.

“Are Renny and Johnny on board?” he asked

sharply. Ward nodded vigorously.

“Yes!” he

croaked. Doc

looked at Monk.

“He’s lying,” he declared coolly. “He’s trying to stall us until the Coastguard gets here. He’s probably hoping we’ll be arrested.”

“We won’t let but be put off,” explained Monk. ‘By the time the Coastguard arrive, we won’t be here any more.”

“That’s right.” Doc nodded. “And we’ll take our friend Ward with us, if that’s really his name.”

Ward turned pale. He sighed.

“You’d be better off shooting me,” he suggested. “With seas like this, we’ll drown before the plane can pick us up.”

Doc ran down to the engine room and pumped fuel from the tanks out onto the water. The oil didn’t smooth the waves, but there were no more breaking waves, which had been the main danger to the aeroplane. He hurried back to the searchlight and signalled. Ham lowered the nose and touched down elegantly.

“Looks like he’s been taking extra lessons of late,” remarked Monk. He stood beside Doc, holding Ward steady so he wouldn’t drift away. “He wasn’t very good at that sort of thing before; he’d have broken his ears.”

He was doing Ham an injustice – and he knew it. Ham was an excellent pilot. He manoeuvred the plane right up close to the ship without even the tip of a wing getting wet.

Doc threw Ward overboard and leapt after him. Monk brought up the rear. The film of oil on the water didn't exactly make for a pleasant swim, but there was nothing to be done about it. Ham helped the three men into the plane, then Doc took the control stick. Ward sat in a corner and pulled a sullen face.

Ward appeared to have resigned himself to his fate, but appearances were deceptive. He waited until the aircraft had reached a certain altitude, then suddenly leapt to his feet and dashed for the door. He even managed to pry it open, but then Monk was upon him and struck him on the head with a spanner. Ward slumped down, half inside the aircraft, half outside, and didn't move a muscle. With a combined effort, Ham and Monk dragged him back inside and shut the door.

'That's what he gets for being so good-natured,' grumbled Monk. 'We should have given him a whack on the ear beforehand.'

'You and "good-natured"!' Ham laughed bitterly and turned to Doc. 'What are we going to do with him?'

"We're taking him to New York," Doc announced. "We'll have a little chat with him."

"He probably won't be very talkative," Monk pointed out. "Someone who wants to kill himself isn't usually in the mood for a chat."

"What about Long Tom?" Ham asked.

"We're flying to the *Montauk* lightship and turning south-southeast from there," said Doc. "We'll have a look around there."

Doc found the lightship and set the specified course. He peered down; he really did intend to have a look around, but there was nothing but water and darkness. Meanwhile, the wind had died down.

"A strange wind," claimed Monk. "It seems to be blowing only around the *Regis*. Has anyone ever experienced anything like this before?"

'There's likely to be a connection between the storm and the sudden heatwave,' explained Doc. 'As we know, heated air expands, and

when this air cools down again, it inevitably creates a draught, which we perceive as wind."

Once again, he brought the aircraft down to a low altitude and slowly flew a few wide circles. Monk and Ham were now also on the lookout for an unusual watercraft, as Ward had mentioned in his radio message. Finally, they spotted a broken wing bobbing on the waves. Doc suspected it came from Long Tom's aeroplane. He felt uneasy at the thought, but he could only be certain once he'd examined the wing closely.

He started the engine and steered the craft towards the wreckage. The waves kept driving the wing away, so Doc had no choice but to jump into the water and swim towards it. Monk and Ham watched him go, unlike Ward, who was still fast asleep.

Doc realised that the snapped wing had indeed belonged to one of his planes. The break was jagged and ragged, as if someone had had to use brute force to sever it from the fuselage. He spent some time examining the wing, then returned to the plane. Monk noticed that Doc was holding something in his hand.

'What's that?' he asked. 'Have you caught a fish?'

Doc handed him the object he'd brought with him. Monk turned it over in his fingers, puzzled.

"Metal," he said at last. "Or is it? It's quite light and looks as if it's been scraped off something."

"Indeed," said Doc with a hint of sarcasm, though he wasn't really in the mood for it at that moment. "Have you ever looked at the inside of a shard from a vacuum flask?"

"I have, actually." Monk looked at the object in his hand once more. "There's a certain resemblance, but I don't understand…"

Doc didn't respond.

They spent a while longer searching the rest of the aeroplane and Long Tom's body, but to no avail. Finally, they gave up. Doc

took the controls again, got the plane airborne and turned it towards New York.

Doc tuned the radio to the frequency of the major radio stations. The news buzzing through the airwaves was disturbing. Police and reporters had now arrived at the *Regis* and had discovered bodies everywhere. Among the dead were the two radio operators. One of them had been found in front of his switched-on radio, where he had apparently died, and it seemed plausible that the radio message blaming Doc Savage for the accident had come from this radio operator. The second radio operator had been lying on the floor and had apparently used his last ounce of strength to write Doc Savage's name on the floor.

A commentator went at length to explain that dying people generally do not lie and that, therefore, there was no reason in this case to doubt the messages sent by the two radio operators. The authorities, he explained, did not for the time being believe Doc Savage capable of such a horrific act; on the other hand, they were now convinced that he had merely faked his death in the laboratory by means of that bomb. But if he were still alive, the question arose as to what he hoped to achieve with this charade and whether it might not be connected to the misfortune that had befallen the *Regis*. The commentator, too, refused to regard Doc Savage as a criminal, yet he cautiously suggested that Doc Savage frequently carried out experiments and that, after all, not all experiments were successful. What if the *Regis* had, by chance, so to speak, collided with one of Doc Savage's experiments?

"Good luck with that," said Monk sourly. "I'm afraid we'll have to answer a lot of questions."

"And we don't even know the answers ourselves yet," remarked Ham, "and if we're unlucky, we'll never find out."

"Oh yes," said Doc. "We've got no other choice if we don't want to end up behind bars. The very least they'd charge us with would be gross negligence resulting in death, and even our lawyer Ham wouldn't find it easy to get us off the hook, especially as he's a suspect himself."

He turned the aircraft towards the Hudson River and picked up his binoculars again. He was on the lookout for the Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse, which the police, of course, knew was in fact a hangar. There was nothing unusual to be seen there, but Doc didn't want to rely on that alone, and he had no intention of falling into the hands of the police. A security system, as primitive as it was effective, had been installed in the hangar for emergencies. As soon as an unauthorised person entered the premises, a contact was automatically triggered; however, rather than alerting the nearest police station, it switched on the lights in another building further downstream, which also belonged to Doc.

The building was illuminated.

Doc landed the aircraft on the river and steered it towards the bank. To the right and left, marshy terrain stretched out. Doc moored the aircraft, then he and his two companions waded ashore. They took the prisoner, who had by now regained consciousness, with them.

Ward developed a sudden and fierce resolve to resist; Monk threatened to beat him up, but Ward wouldn't be dissuaded. Finally, Monk hammered his fist into Ward's jaw, and Ward lost both his courage and his consciousness. They dragged him to the outskirts of the town, then Ham hailed a taxi.

'We've had a breakdown with our car,' he explained, before the taxi driver had a chance to ask any silly questions. 'Our friend couldn't manage the walk; he collapsed.'

Monk lived in a penthouse in one of the high-rises on Wall Street. This was where he had his laboratory, which was even more modern and fully equipped than Doc's facility. The other rooms, too, were furnished in a modern style with glass, chrome and leather, so that Ham, who had a soft spot for the traditional, felt a pang of unease every time he had to visit Monk. Ham himself lived amongst old furniture in a bachelor flat above his club on Park Avenue. The club was so posh that even the waiters were impoverished English aristocrats.

Monk did not live alone. He had chosen a pig as his playmate, a scrawny piglet with long legs and enormous ears that

looked like wings. Whilst Monk was away, a housekeeper looked after the animal. She did not live in the house, but came every day to check that everything was in order. The pig was called Habeas Corpus.

When Monk and his companions had reached the roof by lift and Monk unlocked the door, Habeas Corpus greeted him enthusiastically, just like a dog. Ham wrinkled his nose in disgust. He didn't like pigs, not even cured or roasted, and thought they were unsuitable as pets.

'You mustn't show your dislike like that,' said Monk. 'Animals are sensitive.'

"The feeling is mutual," explained Ham. "The beast doesn't like me either. We know where we stand with each other."

Doc went straight to the lab, where he was just as familiar with his way around as he was in his own. He fiddled about with test tubes and colourful liquids. Ham herded Ward, who had regained consciousness, into Monk's living room, whilst Monk stayed with Doc.

"Go over there now," said Doc after a while. "Tie Ward's hands behind his back so he can't lash out. I'll be right there."

Monk set to work. He twisted Ward's arms behind his back and told Ham to tie them together with a tie. Reluctantly, Ham parted with his expensive necktie, as there was no rope to hand and Monk's shabby self-tie ties were in the bedroom wardrobe. Ward was so taken aback that he didn't think to resist. "Why are we tying him up?" Ham wanted to know.

"Doc's request," replied Monk. "He probably wants to take the bloke apart now."

Ward swallowed and turned pale once more.

A short while later, Doc appeared. He was holding a syringe in one hand and an alcohol-soaked cotton wool ball in the other. He rolled up Ward's jacket and shirt sleeves and, after thoroughly cleaning the needle, jabbed the syringe under his skin. Ward watched him with wide, frightened eyes.

"What's that?" asked Ham.

Doc replied in the Mayan language, which he and his companions had learnt years earlier in the Central American jungle when he took over the legacy his father had left him: a gold mine nestled amongst rugged mountains. It was from this mine that the money came which enabled Doc to carry out his work and maintain his lifestyle. Once a week, at a set time, the Maya who worked in the mine and lived in a nearby village would switch on a radio that Doc had given them, and whenever he needed money, he would let them know in code. Soon afterwards, a mule caravan carrying gold bars would set off for the coast, where the bars were loaded onto a ship and transported to New York. In the so-called civilised world, very few people understood the Mayan language, so Doc and his men always used it whenever they didn't want any outsiders to overhear them.

'A drug that paralyses his willpower,' explained Doc. 'It makes him susceptible to outside influences. He'll have little choice but to tell us the truth.'

They waited. After a few minutes, Ward began to twitch and writhe; he was clearly sensing the change taking place within him and assumed that Doc had poisoned him.

"You're going to talk now!" Doc said gruffly.

Ward rolled his eyes and bared his teeth, then threw his head back and howled like a wolf.

Monk stood with his legs apart in front of Ward and grinned at him. Ward stopped howling and swallowed; his eyes were bloodshot.

'We're up here on the roof of the world,' said Monk cheerfully, 'no one can hear you here; you can scream for as long and as loudly as you like. But it won't do you any good—

you'll just end up hoarse. We won't untie you until you've spilled the beans."

"What do you want to know?" asked Ward, distraught.

"Where are our friends?" Monk enquired. Ward

licked his lips and stared at Doc.

“Have… have you poisoned me?” His voice was shaky.

“If you tell the truth, you’ll survive,” replied Doc with a Solomonic air.

Ward thought for a moment.

“Who are these friends?” he then asked, feigning naivety.

“Long Tom,” said Monk.

“And Renny and Johnny,” said Ham.

‘What do I get if I sing?’

“I’m not quite sure…” Monk shrugged. “Above all, you’ll keep what you’ve got – for example, your eyes, your ears and your life. Isn’t that a fair offer?”

Ward doubled over and swore. You could tell he was scared.

‘I’ve heard,’ he said uncertainly, ‘that Doc Savage doesn’t kill anyone if he can help it. He doesn’t torture anyone either.’

“I wouldn’t count on that if I were you,” said Monk. “Where are our friends?”

“Uncle Penguin has taken them away.”

11.

Doc, Ham and Monk looked at one another, at a loss.

"He is himself at us !" Monk Monk. "I 'll quarter him!"

"I'm not joking!" protested Ward.

"Give me a knife!" roared Monk. "I'll gouge his eye out." Ham pulled

out a pocket knife and handed it to Monk.

"Here you go," he said. "Always happy to be of service."

Monk snapped the knife open and glared menacingly at his victim. Ward let out a shriek.

"Wait!" he wailed. "The Uncle Penguin is a boat and belongs to Cheaters Slagg!"

"Cheaters Slagg," Doc repeated thoughtfully. "Is he the same as Montmorency Frederick Slagg, who has often chartered his ship to explorers?"

"That's right," said Ward.

"So he wasn't lying after all." Disappointed, Monk closed the knife and handed it back to Ham. "Don't lose it; we might still need it."

Ham laughed and put the knife away.

"When and how did this all start?" Doc wanted to know.

"I'm not sure…" Ward shrugged. "Five or six years ago, Cheaters Slagg was at the South Pole for the first time – not right on the pole,

but nearby. He set up a supply depot there for a research aircraft. He must have found the valley back then."

Doc and his companions waited. Ward took a deep breath; apparently he'd brought himself round to no longer hoping for leniency, but to tell the truth—a decision in which the drug Doc had injected him with was probably not entirely blameless.

"Only two people knew of the valley's existence," explained Ward. "Derek Flammen was the research pilot for whom Slagg was supposed to set up the supply depot; he was there and, of course, saw the valley too. The second person is Velma Crale. She stumbled upon the valley by chance whilst travelling to the Pole. She landed and realised from the tracks that Cheaters' Slagg had been there before her. When she got back home, she tracked Slagg down. She wanted to become his partner, but she had no money. She wanted to buy her way into his company by keeping her mouth shut. She demanded half the haul just for her silence! Slagg thought that price a bit too high and decided to get rid of the lady. That's why he set his sights on the silver sloop, but Velma Crale had got wind of it. She made her escape in time and then wanted to make a clean getaway, but she never got the chance."

"How does Thurston H. Wardhouse fit into this?" asked Doc.

"I don't know," said Ward.

"Why is the valley at the South Pole so interesting?"

"I don't know."

"What caused the heatwave?"

"I don't know."

"Ham, give me that knife again," said Monk. "I've got to teach this bloke a bloody lesson!"

Ward flinched, tears streaming down his face.

"I've told you everything I know!" he wailed. "I'm just a sailor on the Uncle Penguin!"

He jumped to his feet, rolled his eyes and collapsed. Doc leaned forward and examined him.

“A heart attack,” he said. “The excitement and the drug were too much for him. He probably didn’t come through the heatwave unscathed either.”

“That’s what you get,” Ham said maliciously to Monk. “You scared the poor man to death.”

“What do you mean, scared to death?” Monk turned to Doc in indignation. “Is he dead?”

“Not yet,” said Doc. “But he’s not far off.”

Doc Savage hurried into the laboratory and prepared a second injection, this time with adrenaline. He returned quickly, worked with cotton wool and alcohol once more, and jabbed the needle into Ward’s body. Ward’s pale face regained its normal sun-kissed colour, and he began to breathe more deeply. But his eyes remained closed.

Doc went next door to the telephone and dialled a number. Half an hour passed, then an ambulance pulled up outside the house. Two men and the driver came up in the lift; they were carrying a stretcher. The driver and his companions were wearing white coats. They behaved as if they were old acquaintances of Doc’s.

Monk was puzzled.

“But this bloke might know even more, Doc!” he pointed out.
“He hasn’t told us where the ship is or what it looks like, and besides, he hasn’t revealed…”

“He’s no longer fit to be questioned,” Doc cut him off. “He’s told us the main thing. We’ll manage without him.”

The orderlies loaded Ward onto the stretcher and wheeled him downstairs. Monk and Ham watched them in silence. They knew that the van would take the prisoner to Doc’s institute in upstate New York. There, the ‘patients’ whom Doc had admitted were subjected to brain surgery that erased every memory of their past. They were then retrained as law-abiding citizens. They were given a new name, a new place of residence and new papers. Those without a trade were allowed to learn one at Doc’s expense; Doc also ensured that they found work. The existence of this institute was known to only a few people, for, on the one hand, Doc acted strictly

illegally, and, secondly, he shied away from trouble with well-meaning reformers who considered other methods of fighting crime to be more humane.

Doc and his companions spent the next few hours tracking down the Uncle Penguins. They phoned shipping companies and port authorities, lighthouse keepers and the coastguard. They had to proceed with caution because they were not allowed to reveal their names. This caution cost them quite a bit of time.

At around ten o'clock in the morning, they received information from a lighthouse keeper that he had spotted the Uncle Penguins in a small cove on the south coast of Connecticut. Doc, Monk and Ham altered their appearance slightly, phoned a taxi and had themselves driven to the Hudson River, where they had left the aeroplane the previous night. On the way, Ham did a bit of shopping.

Just in time, Doc spotted the police officers guarding the aeroplane and told the driver to carry on to Long Island. The driver grew a little suspicious and adjusted his rear-view mirror so that he could watch his passengers. He grinned and said nothing. Apparently, he didn't feel obliged to snitch on the famous Doc Savage. Without a word, he passed the latest issue of a New York newspaper round to the back.

The headlines announced that the police and the government were searching for Doc Savage. Although no reward had been offered for his capture, it was clearly only a matter of time before one would be.

Doc, Ham and Monk got out in front of a lonely barn. Without a word, Doc rewarded the driver with a generous tip and waited until the car had disappeared from view. Inside the barn was a small amphibious aircraft that Doc kept in reserve for similar emergencies. He had rented the barn from a farmer who wasn't interested in what Doc wanted it for.

Doc and his two companions rolled the aircraft out and climbed aboard. Doc took his place behind the control stick and set course for Connecticut.

The south coast of Connecticut is rugged and not particularly remote, but the population is not evenly distributed. Some areas are as desolate as the Sahara, and the bay they were looking for was one of them.

A small ship lay in the bay. From above, it resembled a dilapidated tramp ship, but the bow was reinforced as if it were meant to crush ice. The hull was short and bulky and sat unusually low in the water.

‘Well, there you go,’ said Doc. ‘That’s bound to be the Uncle Penguin.’

He handed the controls over to Ham, went aft and changed his clothes. Ham flew a wide arc and landed the aeroplane near the ship. Monk opened the door and waved across. On deck were a few men who did not wave back. With stony faces, they stared at the aeroplane.

“Where are we?” asked Monk in Italian.

He wasn’t particularly good at Italian, but he hoped the men on the ship didn’t understand the language at all. They were to get the impression that they were dealing with two foreign tourists who’d lost their way.

It wasn’t immediately clear what impression the people on the ship actually had. They behaved as if they were made of wood. Ham and Monk decided to distract the blokes a little and take the charade to the extreme. With some faff, they lowered an inflated dinghy into the water; Doc was inside the dinghy, but the men on the ship couldn’t see that. Ham climbed in. With more effort than skill, Monk and Ham managed to capsize the dinghy. Ham and Doc fell into the water; Ham started ranting in Italian, whilst Doc immediately dived beneath the surface. He was wearing a diving suit and a wide belt with countless pockets containing technical equipment that had saved his life on many occasions. He was also equipped with an oxygen apparatus.

Underwater, he swam towards the ship.

Ham climbed back into the boat, and Monk too left the motor and got into the boat. They paddled leisurely towards the ship. By now, their aim was no longer simply to distract the crew – they'd succeeded in that – but to bring the whole affair to a happy conclusion. They intended to enquire about their position in broken English and return to the aeroplane.

By now, more men had come on deck.

They were dressed like sailors, yet very few of them looked like seafarers. They looked as though, generally speaking, they didn't need to work for a living. Standing on the bridge was a burly man wearing sunglasses.

'Apparently, Cheaters Slagg wears glasses like that,' said Monk. 'So we really are looking at the Uncle Penguin.'

So far, he and Ham hadn't been able to make out the ship's name. Ham was getting annoyed.

"You're not making enough noise," he grumbled. "Usually you're shouting so loud your vocal cords are nearly bursting! We need to get these blokes interested in us so they can't take an interest in Doc."

Monk swore in Italian. They approached the bow and could make out the letters: *Uncle Penguin*.

"Thank God!" said Monk quietly. "It would be a shame if we'd caused all this commotion for nothing."

Meanwhile, Doc had reached the stern of the ship and emerged cautiously. He listened intently and kept a sharp lookout. He could hear a jumble of voices above; everyone on board seemed to have rushed to the bow. From one of the pockets in his belt, he pulled out a long silk cord with a folding hook; this cord was part of his standard kit, and he'd used it before to lower himself from the window of a room in a New York hotel to eavesdrop on Flammen's conversation with Velma Crale. He looped the cord several times around his left forearm and flung the hook up towards the railing. On the second attempt, the hook caught, and Doc began to climb. He clung to the ship's side and peered forward. He had

wasn’t mistaken; there was no one in sight. The crew had indeed gathered at the bow to watch Ham and Monk getting up to their antics.

He swung himself over the railing and ran towards a companionway. Compared to the sunlight, the companionway was as dark as a cave, and it took Doc a few seconds to adjust to the difference. Below deck, there was a pungent stench of oil.

Doc walked on slowly and turned a corner in the corridor. At that very moment, he felt a hard, cool object against his side and realised it was the barrel of a revolver.

‘I haven’t been so startled in a long time,’ said Velma Crale. ‘Mind you, my hands are a bit shaky!’

12.

Doc Savage was very dissatisfied with himself. It had been years since anyone had managed to sneak up on him so closely without being noticed. He prided himself on his instincts and his keen hearing, and now this…

But he had just emerged from the water, and besides, a machine was running quietly somewhere. The noise had drowned out the woman's footsteps. That realisation did nothing to help him out of his predicament at that moment, however.

"You turn up wherever one least expects you," he said.

The pressure of the metal against his ribs eased slightly.

"It's you!" said Velma Crale, taken aback. "I thought it was someone from the crew."

"No," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "I'm not part of the crew."

Doc felt the gun touch his wrist. "Do you want that thing?" asked the girl. "No," he said. "But you should put it away."

'You'll need a gun!' she said earnestly. He couldn't be bothered to explain to her that he almost never carried a gun because he didn't want to get used to it. He knew that owning a gun creates a certain dependence, leaving the owner helpless if they lose it.

'How did you get on board?' he asked. 'And when?'

"Last night," she whispered. "I followed Flammen's trail. When he went on board, I was right behind him. Luckily, it was pitch black. I

climbed up the anchor chain. Since then, I've been looking around here."

"What have you found?"

"Plenty!"

"For example?"

"Did you notice the waterline?"

"The boat sits quite low in the water."

"Exactly," said the girl. "The ship's crammed full like a sausage casing, and the cargo is unusual, to say the least. The ship's even been specially converted. Some of the hatches are enormous, and underneath them are massive metal boxes – at least, that's what I thought they were. But I couldn't get them open."

"Thank heaven you weren't discovered."

"It wasn't particularly difficult not to be discovered. It's hot and stuffy down here, and the crew stayed on deck. By the way, there are wooden crates on board too, and I managed to break one of them open."

"What was in it?"

The girl hesitated; she didn't seem quite sure whether she should tell the truth.

"A long rubber hose," she explained at last. "It's reinforced, as if it were meant to withstand high pressure."

"Strange." Doc thought for a moment. "Did you come across any of my companions?"

"I don't know. There are prisoners here—'Long Tom', 'Renny' and 'Johnny'."

"A pale dwarf, a tall skeleton and a man with fists strong enough to crack walnuts?"

"Or door frames," said Doc. "Yes, that's them."

"They're at the back."

"Show me the way," said Doc.

‘We’ll probably get caught doing that!’ warned the girl.

Doc said nothing. Velma turned on her heel and led the way. He could now see that she was no longer wearing the modest dress, but a flight suit.

Renny had been working on the bars of the door that blocked his path to freedom. The bars were nearly an inch thick and firmly anchored. Renny hadn’t been able to break them out, but he’d hidden a few.

He spotted Doc and the girl and stopped what he was doing abruptly.

‘Is there a chance…?’ he asked quietly.

“Where are Johnny and Long Tom?” asked Doc.

“I have the dubious pleasure of being here as well,” said Johnny smugly.

“You can count me in too,” said Long Tom.

“Wonderful,” said Doc ironically. “So here we all are together again.”

He looked at the door and realised that brute force alone wouldn’t do the trick. The girl grabbed Doc’s arm.

“Wait a moment,” she said. And to Renny: “Where’s Thurston Wardhouse?”

“Next door,” said Renny. “I mean, next cell…” The girl

dug her fingernails into Doc’s wrist.

“Get him out first!” she said shrillly.

“How do you expect me to do that?” said Doc. “It’s no small matter to free anyone from here at all.”

Ham’s voice could be heard faintly from outside. He was asking, in Italian, the name of the country he was in. The men on deck replied, but what they were shouting was incomprehensible. Doc grabbed Renny’s hand and hurried over to the neighbouring cell.

“Hey!” said Renny. “What’s going on…”

He fell silent, for Doc was already gone. He looked at the door behind which the ominous Wardhouse was supposedly located. It was made of thick wood and had a barred window. Only now did he realise that it smelled like a cowshed down here. Apparently, Cheaters' Slagg had been transporting cattle in the meantime, and these rooms had served as stables. Velma Crale had followed Doc and was peering through the window.

"Wardhouse!" she hissed.

Wardhouse's handsome face appeared at the bars. In the dim light of the corridor, it was clear that he was in a right state. His left eye was black and blue, and his shirt was in tatters.

"Velma!" he said, dumbfounded.

Someone stirred behind Wardhouse.

"Who's that?" asked Velma.

"Derek Flammen," replied Wardhouse.

Flammen pushed Wardhouse aside and looked out.

"Who's with you?" he demanded. "How on earth did you get on board?"

Doc tried to cover Velma's mouth, but it was already too late.

"Doc Savage," she said innocently. "I climbed up the anchor chain, and he…"

Derek Flammen didn't let her finish; he'd clearly heard enough. He let out a blood-curdling roar.

"Help!" he screeched. "Savage is on the ship! Cheaters, help!!"

Wardhouse spun round and landed an uppercut on Flammen. Flammen toppled over and made indistinct noises.

"He's the leader!" cried Wardhouse excitedly. "I'd suspected as much, but now we know for sure! He pretended to me that he was a prisoner too! He probably wanted to find out how much I'd already told Velma!"

Flammen got back to his feet. Wardhouse spun round once more and, in a rage, began pounding him. Flammen fell silent.

“Don’t kill him,” Doc warned.

A group of men came down the corridor. The gangsters spotted Doc and the girl and opened fire.

Doc leapt back in a flash and dragged the girl with him. He spotted another door, shoved Velma through it, darted after her and pulled her to the floor.

“Derek Flammen!” said Velma indignantly. “I hope … I hope that he …”

She fell silent. Apparently, she couldn’t think of anything worth hoping for. Doc realised that he and Velma were in a cabin with no second exit, but with a porthole. The porthole was too small for a person to fit through. Doc ran to the door, barred it, and hurried to the porthole.

“What a shame,” said Velma, confused. “We can’t free the prisoners…”

“For now, we’ve got our hands full just freeing ourselves,” said Doc. “We mustn’t even think about anything else.”

Once again, he opened one of the zips on the pockets studded along his wide belt. This time, he took out a small metal tube. He pressed a button and the lid of the tube sprang open. Doc squeezed out the contents and used them to draw a circle around the porthole. Inside the tube was a mushy mass that hissed softly as it came into contact with the air and the steel of the ship’s side. It cut through the metal like hot lead through ice.

Doc kicked the porthole, which fell into the sea, taking the circular cut-out around it with it. Doc threw the tube after it. It sank immediately; bubbles and steam rose, then the water settled again.

‘Come on,’ said Doc. ‘Quick!’

Outside, the men were pounding on the door. They were swearing. The girl stood there rooted to the spot.

“What sort of stuff was that?” she asked. “Thermite,” he said impatiently. “It’s generally used for incendiary bombs. I’ve come up with a better use for it. Jump!”

Velma furrowed her brow; she didn't seem entirely happy with how things were turning out. She shook her head.

"We won't make it," she whispered.

"We've got to try. Just jump already!"

She bit her lower lip, then her face brightened as if she'd finally made up her mind. She pulled the revolver from the pocket of her slip.

"I really do find this very unpleasant," she said, "but there's too much at stake. Put your hands up!"

Doc stared at her, without moving a muscle.

"Perhaps you might manage to escape after all," said the girl.
"If I hand you over to these people, they'll probably let me in on the deal. I have to take the risk."

'You're quite unscrupulous when it comes to money,' said Doc. 'Or am I mistaken?'

"It depends on your point of view," said Velma lamely. "You're rich; you can afford to have a good character. But I…"

Doc turned and swung himself through the hole he'd cut in the ship. Velma stared after him without firing. Pale as a ghost, she holstered her gun again.

13.

At the last moment, Velma Crale decided to climb through the hole as well. At the same time, the door behind her flew open; men stormed into the cabin and threw themselves at the girl. She screamed and fought back, but the men were stronger.

'It's good to see you again,' said Cheaters Slagg. 'Keep an eye on her!'

He ran to the leak, whose jagged edges were still smouldering, and peered out. Some distance away, he spotted a fleeing shadow and fired his revolver at it.

'That's Savage!' he bellowed.

"Did you hit him?" asked one of the men.

"Probably not," replied Slagg grumpily. "Two of you stay with the girl, four guard the other prisoners, the rest come up on deck with me."

He set off running, and the men he'd named followed him.

"I've just thought of something." Slagg trotted over to the railing and turned to his men once more. "Let the boss out."

"Do you mean Derek Flammen?" asked one of the men.

"Who else?!" shouted Slagg. "Bring him up here!"

Two men hurried back below. Slagg glanced over at the dinghy, which was still manoeuvring around the bow with Ham and Monk on board, as they didn't know whether Doc had succeeded. Slagg aimed his revolver at Ham, and Ham let himself drop out of the boat.

“What a disaster!” grumbled Slagg. “There are days when everything just goes wrong…”

Slagg now fired at Monk, who also let himself fall out of the boat. He thrashed about and sank beneath the surface of the water.

“A machine gun!” ordered Slagg. “I want to riddle those blokes with bullets!”

Three men hauled the machine gun over – a heavy military weapon left over from the war. A gangster shouldered the gun, Slagg stood behind it and started firing wildly. The dinghy was torn to shreds.

Derek Flammen came up on deck. He was a little out of breath and beside himself with rage. He shoved Slagg aside and took the machine gun himself. He fired at the aeroplane.

He hit the wings, the windows and the fuel tank. The fuel leaked out, but it didn’t catch fire. Flammen swore.

“A signal pistol!” he ordered. “Quick!”

Slagg hurried to the bridge and returned with a signal pistol. It was loaded. Flammen snatched it from his hand and took aim. A green fireball swept in a gentle arc towards the aircraft and burst, setting the spilled fuel alight.

Slagg was not yet satisfied with this success.

“We should set the whole bay alight,” he said. “We should also post a man in the lookout to keep an eye out for where those blokes resurface.”

“Right.” Derek Flammen thought for a moment. He turned to the crewmen who were still standing nearby. “Pump oil onto the water! Slagg, you go up to the lookout yourself; at least I can rely on you to some extent.”

Slagg and the rest of the men hurried to carry out Flammen’s orders. A short while later, a black, stinking sludge poured into the bay and caught fire as well. Flammen watched the scene; his eyes glowed.

“The beach all round here is sandy,” he said to the last man who had stayed with him. “Those scoundrels can’t go ashore anywhere without us spotting them. They don’t stand a chance! If they stay in the water, they’ll suffocate or be burnt; if they come out, I’ll mow them down.”

The gangster was impressed by Flammen’s strategy and told him so at length. Flammen smiled grimly. He liked being praised, even if it was only by a subordinate. He patted the man on the shoulder.

“And now we’re going to pull away a bit,” he explained. “We’ll head for the mouth of the bay and turn round there.”

The ship was built sturdy enough not to be endangered by the fire; nevertheless, the situation would naturally have become uncomfortable if the *Uncle Penguin* had remained exposed to the flames for too long. The anchor was hauled up; one of the men stood by and sprayed the chain with water to wash away the burning oil or at least put it out. The propeller began to turn, the bow swung round sluggishly, and the ship made its way towards the mouth of the bay.

Flammen stationed a few more men with rapid-fire rifles at the railing and ordered them to keep a sharp lookout. They did so, but Doc Savage and his two companions remained out of sight.

The oil burned slowly, and black smoke spread across the bay. Slagg came down from the lookout. Once again, he was dissatisfied with how things were going.

“The smoke is more of a nuisance to us than to Savage and his cronies,” he said. “We can’t see a thing, and they’ll be able to get away from us.”

“That’s right,” said Flammen. And to the men: “Launch the boats, sail round the bay!”

The lifeboats were fitted with engines, and as they sat low in the water, the situation was not without danger for the crew. But Flammen paid no heed to that. Reluctantly, the men swung the boats out, lowered them and climbed in. They steered carefully along the

beach, taking care not to get too close to the fire. The

smoke hardly hindered them. As there was hardly any wind, it rose almost vertically.

Fifteen minutes passed. Doc and his two companions were still nowhere to be seen. Flammen gazed up at the cloudless sky and the sun.

‘Put up the awning!’ he commanded.

The men who had stayed on board stared at him in disbelief. Cheater’s Slagg cleared his throat loudly.

“But …,” he said.

Flammen didn’t let him finish.

“You’re to put up the awning!” he ordered.

Slagg nodded grumpily. Through a megaphone, he ordered the men in the boats to return to *the Uncle Penguin*, whilst the rest forced open the hatches. They worked with the ease of seasoned hands, as if they’d done this many times before.

The ship was equipped with an unusual number of short loading booms and a vast number of hoists. The cargo was hoisted up onto the deck from below using the hoists. The cargo consisted mainly of huge, collapsible metal discs that fitted together almost seamlessly and were assembled horizontally across the deck. The discs appeared to consist of two layers. The upper surface was as smooth as a mirror; beneath it, a leaden grey shimmered. The discs were thick and so heavy that the men had to strain to hoist them up.

Cheaters Slagg and Derek Flammen paced back and forth impatiently, supervising the workers and swearing. It took thirty minutes to erect the strange sunshade. Flammen glanced at his watch, then nodded to Slagg.

“All right,” he said. “Go below.”

Slagg clattered down a companionway. Meanwhile, the lifeboats had returned and were dangling from the davits once more.

Flammen grabbed the megaphone.

“Attention!” he shouted. “Everyone take cover!”

He peered out across the bay. The oil had now burnt out, and the smoke was gradually clearing. Flammen ran to the helm and turned the ship across the bay. The *Uncle Penguin* was no longer moving, yet the hull vibrated from the thumping of the engines. Flammen mused, with a touch of humour, that a pilot seeing the ship from above would surely think it was a peculiar submarine, a shimmering cigar, because the metal discs concealed the entire deck. In poor light or at night, the *Uncle Penguin* probably still looked like a cigar even from close up, but in daylight an observer at close range would naturally realise that they were looking at a perfectly normal ship with an unusual sun sail.

The crew had meanwhile taken cover; only two men were fiddling with the hatches amidships. They flung the covers open and also disappeared from view.

Gradually, it began to get warm. Derek Flammen wiped the sweat from his face; he remained on the bridge. Slagg came up from below and stood beside him. The mercury in the thermometer was rising visibly. Slagg was sweating too; his glasses kept slipping down his nose.

“We’ve got visitors,” he said after a while. “The newspapers will soon have something to write about again…”

He pointed out to sea. Flammen peered through his binoculars and spotted a small sailing yacht approaching rapidly. Apparently, the men on the yacht had noticed the black smoke and had also seen the strange ship off the mouth of the bay, and now they wanted to satisfy their curiosity. Flammen and Slagg knew they would no longer have the chance to do so.

The men on the yacht were getting nervous; you could tell even from this distance. They squinted at the sun, chattered excitedly amongst themselves and hastily erected a sun awning. But it was no use. One by one, the men on the yacht collapsed and died. The rudderless boat drifted onto a reef, was holed and sank.

Derek Flammen put on a pair of dark sunglasses. The heat became unbearable; Slagg wrapped a bandage round his head.

“All right,” said Flammen. “You can go back down.”

Slagg breathed a sigh of relief and hurried below deck. A short while later, he returned. The heat was already subsiding. The hatches amidships were closed, and one by one the crew members crawled out into the daylight.

“That should do for Savage and his lot,” said Slagg.
“There’s no one left alive within a five-mile radius.”

“That’s right.” Flammen nodded. “We don’t need to worry about Savage any more.”

He raised the megaphone and issued orders once more. The men packed away the shimmering plates, and the ship set course for the open sea. At the same time, a fierce wind sprang up. The air grew cooler.

Cheater’s Slagg laboriously unwound the bandage from his head, rolled it up and put it in his pocket.

“We made a mistake,” he said. “We shouldn’t have come into this bay.”

Derek Flammen frowned.

“But there was no other option!” he said heatedly. “Where else could I have boarded?”

“You didn’t board alone,” Slagg reminded him. “You brought the girl with you!”

Flammen grew angry and clenched his fists.

“It was a coincidence!” he said. “Are you going to hold me responsible for that?”

“Someone has to take responsibility, after all…”

Flammen smiled. From one moment to the next, he became friendly, but this friendliness was not without its dangers.

‘Certainly,’ he said quietly. ‘Am I to understand that you’re criticising my methods?’

Slagg swallowed and looked very frightened. He took off his glasses and awkwardly wiped the lenses.

“Of course not,” he said. “Why would I? You’re the boss, after all.”

“That’s right,” said Flammen gently. “And never forget that!”

“No.” Slagg shook his head and put his glasses back on. “I won’t forget it.”

“Good.” Flammen’s smile faded. “Now take the prisoners to my cabin.”

Slagg took no chances. He summoned all the men who weren’t needed at that moment. He ordered them to arm themselves to the teeth and accompany him to the prisoners. He fetched the men from their cells and had them herded into Flammen’s cabin. He took care of the girl himself. Velma Crale now looked a little shaken. She hadn’t come through the scuffle during her capture unscathed. Her slip was torn, her hair was dishevelled, and her nose looked a little swollen.

Derek Flammen sat on a chair and looked with interest at Doc’s three friends, then he looked at the girl and finally fixed his gaze on Thurston H. Wardhouse. Wardhouse was in high spirits, as if he didn’t mind living in the stinking hold of a ship. Nor did he seem as confused as he had on the *Regis* when he’d run off from Johnny and Renny. Renny could now see that, despite his effeminate good looks, Wardhouse was athletically built. He estimated him to be about forty, but he had the temperament of a twenty-year-old. Until now, he’d simply concealed it skilfully.

Derek Flammen smiled again; he was as amiable as a cultured host. The cook had meanwhile served him a spartan meal consisting of a bottle of milk and a loaf of white bread. He broke off a chunk of the bread, took a hearty bite and took a sip from the bottle.

‘I regret that we are getting to know one another under such unfortunate circumstances,’ he said affably. ‘You may well believe me when I say that it pains me not to be able to get to know you better. But the circumstances …’

He shrugged, chewed, swallowed and took another bite. Renny eyed him darkly.

‘You can spare yourself and us this nonsense,’ he said gruffly. ‘What do you want from us?’

“The blacksmith is to cut four pieces from a heavy chain.” Flammen turned to Slagg. “Tie the girl’s and Savage’s friends’ hands and throw them overboard.”

“Well,” said Slagg lamely, “are you quite sure we don’t need them any more?”

“We never needed them,” Flammen declared. “I only wanted the three men to put pressure on Savage if necessary. I’d like to get rid of them; they’re too dangerous. And the girl should have been shot the very day she came to you and told you she’d found the valley in Antarctica.”

“That was our intention,” replied Slagg grimly. “We went to great lengths!”

Flammen didn’t respond. He eyed Wardhouse.

“And now to you!” he said sharply. “You’re a fraud!”

“I had no idea about your plans!” cried Wardhouse. And condescendingly: “My work was meant to be a scientific contribution for the good of humanity, not to be misused by criminals for their own gain!”

“So we’re criminals, are we?” asked Flammen ironically. “Aren’t you going a bit too far?”

“You are a criminal!” repeated Wardhouse with utter conviction. “You are responsible for the deaths of many people!”

“You’re making it too simple,” Flammen rebuked him. “Has it never occurred to you that these people might still be alive if you hadn’t betrayed us?”

Thurston H. Wardhouse’s face betrayed deep unease.

“Miss Crale overheard you,” he said. “You intended not to give me my share!”

‘And you believed her…’, said Flammen, sounding sad. ‘Couldn’t it be that she was lying?’

Wardhouse remained silent. Flammen scrutinised the girl.

“So you were eavesdropping,” he said. “That’s not something one does, but you’ll never learn that now; it’s too late. Why were you spying on me or Slagg?”

“If I hadn’t spied, I’d be dead by now,” she said sharply. “At least this way I found out that I was to be murdered on the Silver Sloop. Fortunately, I managed to leave the ship in time!”

“But you didn’t warn your fellow passengers,” said Flammen thoughtfully. “I’m afraid we have nothing to reproach one another for; you’re no nobler than we are. The only difference is that we hold the upper hand. Why, by the way, do you suspect that we’re responsible for the misfortune of the Silver Sloop? Couldn’t Wardhouse be to blame as well?”

“Poor Wardhouse!” scoffed the girl. “I suppose you want to pin the attack on the *Regis* on him as well!”

“After all, he was on board.” Flammen turned back to Slagg.
“Shoot the woman before you tie the chain round her and throw her overboard.”

Wardhouse took a step towards him; clearly, his guards’ firearms no longer intimidated him.

‘You can’t do anything without me!’ he said forcefully. ‘You still need me!’

“Perhaps we can manage without you,” said Flammen coldly. “I don’t know, but if necessary, we’d give it a go.”

‘Then you’d better start preparing for that,’ said Wardhouse. ‘Because if you kill the prisoners, you’ll have to do without my help

!” Flammen frowned. Once more he broke off a piece of bread, popped it between his teeth and took a sip of milk.

“Make yourself perfectly clear,” he demanded.

“If you murder the prisoners, I won’t lift a finger for you,” Wardhouse declared with pathos. “I won’t tolerate any more murders! Spare the prisoners, and I’ll help you. You can be sure that without me, or without my knowledge, you’ll have a hard time of it!”

“Cheaters.” Flammen turned to Slagg. “What do you make of this?”

“Shoot the prisoners,” said Slagg. “Kill Wardhouse as well. The devil can take them all!”

“Let’s wait a little longer,” decided Flammen. “Lock them up again.”

The crew dragged the prisoners out and down the companionway. Long Tom peered through a porthole and watched the American coast gradually recede.

“I’d really like to give it a go …,” he said quietly. “Are you mad?!” exclaimed Renny, startled.

“What?” Long Tom looked at him in surprise. “That’s not like you at all. Since when have you been in favour of restraint and caution?”

“There’s something you don’t know about,” replied Renny.

“For example?”

“A system, or at least part of a system.”

“I don’t get it!”

“You’ll get it in the end. You just mustn’t lose your patience.”

14.

Five weeks and three days passed. Long Tom, Renny and Johnny tried to keep track of the calendar and scratched a line into the paint on their cell wall every day. During this time, a guard stood outside the door day and night, and the light was never switched off. As an additional security measure, Slagg had forbidden the prisoners from talking to one another. If they were caught speaking, they would receive no food the following day. They had the choice of either keeping quiet or going hungry.

The three men felt hardly hindered by this rule. They were proficient in sign language and could therefore communicate silently. But as things stood, even the most detailed communication was of no use.

Then, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the engine suddenly fell silent and the anchor chain rattled. Slagg and Flammen had chosen not to take the prisoners' watches, so they knew what time it was.

'That should mark the end of our long journey,' said Renny quietly.
'It seems we've reached our destination.'

'Yes,' said Long Tom, 'wherever that destination may be.'

'That's just what I was about to point out,' Johnny interjected. 'Unfortunately, we know absolutely nothing about this vessel's course or destination.'

'I never cease to be amazed,' said Long Tom, 'that you don't choke on sentences like that.'

"I find your conclusion at the very least premature," explained Johnny.
'How do you know we aren't just stopping here and then

carry on?"

"That's right," said Renny. "We don't know. But we've been travelling for so long that we really ought to be arriving by now."

Below deck, they'd noticed nothing more of the journey than that it had initially grown warmer and warmer, only to gradually cool down again. By now it was so cold that Slagg had deigned to provide his prisoners with padded overalls and sheepskin coats.

Incidentally, Doc Savage's friends were alone in a cell. Since leaving the bay and visiting Derek Flammen's cabin, they hadn't seen Wardhouse or Velma Crale.

The three men sat motionless, listening. Heavy boots trampled across the deck and the davits creaked; it seemed that one of the lifeboats was being swung out and lowered into the water.

"In any case, it must be clear that we're near a coast," remarked Renny. "I'd bet anything on that!"

"You'd stand a good chance of winning," said Johnny.

The three men exchanged questioning glances; finally, Renny nodded. He stood up, slipped his right hand into his coat pocket and walked towards the door.

"Let's give it a go," he whispered. Then, aloud: "What on earth is going on here?!"

The guard peered through the bars from outside. "I'd like to know that myself!" he said gruffly. "Weren't you told to keep quiet?"

Renny pulled his hand out of his pocket. He aimed a water pistol at the guard's face and fired. A liquid sprayed into the guard's face. He gasped and sank to the floor.

"The system seems to be working," said Renny dryly. "Doc's liquid gas has knocked the bloke out."

He pulled a second object out of his pocket – a tube of thermite, like the one Doc had used to cut an emergency exit through the porthole

. Doc had slipped the water pistol and the tube to Renny when he'd broken into the ship and Velma Crale had dragged him to the nearest cell to free Wardhouse first. Doc had anticipated difficulties and wanted to ensure that his companions could free themselves if necessary.

Renny smeared the thermite all round the door bolt, watched, fascinated, as the substance ate through the steel, and hammered at it with his fist. The door flew open; the bolt remained caught on the door frame.

"Let's hope we've picked a good time," said Renny. "Come on, lads."

He set off. Johnny and Long Tom ran after him.

"Shall we take Wardhouse and the girl with us?" asked Renny.

"Without Wardhouse, we might not be alive anymore," replied Long Tom. "We owe him a favour."

"And the girl?"

"She's as two-faced as you can get," said Johnny. "Still, we shouldn't just leave her to her fate."

Renny nodded. The three men went to the neighbouring cell, but neither Wardhouse nor the girl were there.

Renny, Long Tom and Johnny hurried up the nearest companionway to the deck. With every step it grew colder; they estimated the temperature to be a few degrees below zero. Suddenly Renny stopped and held a finger to his lips in warning. Johnny and Long Tom also froze. Voices could be heard coming from a cabin further to the right.

'The provisions on board will last for at least four months,' said Cheaters Slagg. 'After that, we'll have no choice but to go shopping. We'll save time if we send off the lists of the things we need and have the goods delivered to a South American port, for example Buenos Aires, which lies directly north of us and is easy to reach. Don't you agree?'

“Quite so,” said Derek Flammen. “Buenos Aires is indeed to the north of us – whether directly, I’ll leave open to debate.”

“It doesn’t matter that much,” said Slagg. “I’ve already drawn up the lists; they’re addressed to the firms that deal in such goods. I’ve put the ship down as the sender. I’m on credit everywhere, so we can be sure we’ll be supplied. Shall I place the orders by telegram?”

“Are you absolutely sure we actually need this stuff?”

“Absolutely certain.”

“Then send the telegrams. Your credit comes in handy; you’ve put all your capital into this venture, and I’ve hardly any money left either. We have to be thrifty. But if you think we need these things, we’ve got no other choice.”

“Take the lists with you, Sparks,” said Slagg, apparently now speaking to the radio operator. “Send everything through and listen in on the latest news. I’d like to know if Savage has turned up again in the meantime.”

“I heard the news just a few minutes ago,” said a stranger’s voice. “There was only a brief mention of Savage. Apparently, there’s no trace of him.”

“So we really did catch him and his two cronies in the bay,” said Slagg, laughing. “May they rest in peace!”

It was the first time Renny, Long Tom and Johnny had heard that Doc, Ham and Monk were no longer alive. They flinched and turned pale. They looked at one another anxiously.

“The police are blaming Savage for the deaths on the *Regis*, on the silver sloop and on a yacht off the bay where we were moored,” explained the radio operator. “The bodies of the crew from that yacht have washed ashore. The police also hold Savage responsible for the heatwaves; they suspect he developed a new kind of radiation that ultimately proved his undoing.”

‘He didn’t develop them, mind you, but they did prove to be his undoing.’ Slagg was amused. ‘Go on now, Sparks, and send

the telegrams."

Immediately afterwards, the radio operator emerged from the cabin. He was an unremarkable, medium-built man. He was holding a number of papers and was trying hard to decipher the text. He turned a corner without looking up, and by the time he heard the faint hiss, it was already too late. He merely felt his vision suddenly go black, then he was unaware of anything else. He lay down on the floor and fell asleep.

Ten minutes later, the radio operator woke up again. He glanced at his watch and wondered at the sudden fainting spell that had overcome him. He was worried about his health. He placed his hand on his heart and was relieved to find that it was still beating. He stood up, gathered up the papers scattered across the planks, checked that they were all still there, and walked down the corridor. He found a door leading outside, opened it and leaned against it. He greedily breathed in the icy air. He coughed and bent his knees slightly. He was very pale.

It was in this state that another crew member spotted him. The man stopped beside him and stared at him.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

The radio operator gave a pitiful grin and shook his head.

'Just a bit of a faint,' he said. 'I'm fine now.'

"You shouldn't be standing by the open door," said the man. "You'll catch a cold."

The radio operator closed the door and continued on to his cabin. It was pleasantly warm in there; a clock ticked on the wall, and a gentle hum came from the radio. The radio operator sat down and sent off the telegrams. The text of the fifth one was a little unusual:

HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY, NEW YORK

SHIP BUENOS AIRES ACE LATMAN INNER VAL VE EXPANDER STOP LATEST OVERTURN ON KNEE SLEEVE STOP BASE

ADJUSTMENT DIVIDED STOP UNCLE PENGUIN SLAGG

The radio operator didn't understand the text, nor was he in the least bit interested in it. He wasn't paid to understand anything, but to carry out orders. Besides, this text was no more complicated than the others, which the radio operator didn't understand either, because he knew nothing about the supplies that Slagg needed or thought he needed. The radio operator sent off the remaining messages too, then filed away all the sheets of paper, pulled a flat bottle out of a drawer and treated himself to a hearty swig.

He put the bottle away again, put on a fur coat and went up on deck. He was still worried about his fainting spell and wondered whether he shouldn't rather sign off at the next opportunity, so as to spend his twilight years ashore in a less strenuous way.

He walked slowly forward towards the nearest companionway. Without any particular purpose, he stopped once more and looked around. He spotted Renny, who was just heading towards the radio operator's cabin.

'Help!' the radio operator shouted in horror. 'Help!!'

He got more help than he needed. Men rushed in from all sides and threw themselves at Renny; they also dragged Long Tom and Johnny out of the cover they'd fled to in a panic.

Renny had muscles like a catcher's and enjoyed nothing more than a good old brawl. In that respect, the next five minutes were among the most enjoyable of his life. They came to an abrupt end when one of the men hammered Renny on the head with an iron bar. Renny went down and only came round when he came into contact with a hard, cold iron surface. He was naked and realised that the men had stripped him to search him for any further weapons.

A short while later, they brought him a lined overall and a new sheepskin coat. Apparently, Slagg and Flammen were unwilling to take the risk that Renny might still have something hidden in his clothes that they hadn't been able to find in their haste.

Renny looked around and realised that Johnny and Long Tom were with him. Johnny looked rather battered; his glasses were broken, and he was wailing at the top of his voice, even though he didn't actually need them. Long Tom, too, had not come through the brawl unscathed.

Renny got dressed, then the three of them looked around. They'd already noticed that they hadn't been taken back to the old cell; given the slashed door, it was no longer fit for use as a prison cell. They realised they were in the adjoining cell, where they'd been looking for Wardhouse and the girl earlier but hadn't found them.

Renny was humming cheerfully to himself.

'You seem to be in a good mood,' said Long Tom.

'Indeed!' replied Renny.

'That's a rare sight,' remarked Johnny. 'Usually you look like a Puritan undertaker. Does that blow to the back of your head have anything to do with it?'

Renny said nothing. He carried on humming.

'You really ought to be crying,' said Long Tom. 'Won't you let us share in your good humour?'

"I was lucky," explained Renny.

"How so?" said Johnny.

"When we were looking for Wardhouse and the girl here earlier, that tube of thermite was getting a bit of a nuisance," said Renny. "I threw it away. I also had the ulterior motive that they'd lock us up here if we were caught again."

"I don't believe that," Johnny declared. "I'm not buying your excuse."

"So what," said Renny. "Anyway, I've got the tube back, and at the next opportunity…"

He fell silent, for footsteps were rumbling towards them from outside. The door was flung open, and two rifles were pointed in. Cheater's Slagg stood between the rifles and grinned. With some fumbling, he took off his tinted

glasses, cleaned them with a clean handkerchief and put them back on.

“Flammen and I have sorted things out,” he announced. “We’ve changed our minds.”

Renny frowned. ‘What do you mean, “you vagrant”?’ he asked. ‘Which view have you changed?’

Slagg bared his teeth.

‘We’ve come to a final decision,’ he said. ‘It concerns the three of you and couldn’t be any more final.’

15.

The messenger had to search for a while before he found the dilapidated building on 34th Street. A rickety staircase led up to a dusty door. A sign read: HIDALGO TRADING CO.

The messenger climbed the stairs, rang the bell, opened the door and stepped into a large, almost empty room. Seated at a desk in a corner was an elderly man in his shirt sleeves, wearing a green visor on his forehead. He took the telegram from the messenger—which was addressed to the Hidalgo Trading Company—and waited until the messenger had closed the door from the outside.

The man put on his jacket, removed the eye patch, pulled on a hat and took his umbrella from the corner. He was in the habit of never leaving the building without an umbrella. He slung the umbrella over his left forearm so that he could reach it easily with his right hand. Inside the umbrella was a revolver holster containing a full-calibre Colt.

The man locked the door and spent a quarter of an hour wandering criss-cross through the streets. When he was certain no one was following him, he jumped into a taxi and had himself driven to a rather dodgy suburb. Another quarter of an hour later, he found himself in front of the house where Monk and Ham had been hiding at the start of the operation, whilst Doc Savage had been trying to eavesdrop on the bandits using a bugging device. From there, Monk and Ham had taken a fake taxi to Doc Savage's to inform him of the *Regis's* misfortune.

Meanwhile, Doc Savage was also at the so-called guesthouse. The old man handed him the telegram. Doc tore open the envelope,

skimmed the few lines and narrowed his eyes. He thought for a moment, thanked the visitor and accompanied him to the door. The man took a roundabout route back to the dilapidated building on 34th Street. His task was to sit in the office of the Hidalgo Trading Co. and get in touch with Doc Savage from time to time should the latter need to go into hiding temporarily for whatever reason.

Incidentally, he refrained from making any comment on the fact that Doc Savage was still alive. He had no inkling of the incident on the south coast of Connecticut; Doc had not told him anything about it. Doc was not particularly talkative when it came to his adventures, and anyone who did not learn of them from other sources had to be content with knowing nothing.

The incident had made headlines in the newspapers, and although Doc Savage had been linked to it, the fact that he had only narrowly escaped death was known only to himself, Ham and Monk. Apart from them, the crew of *the Uncle Penguin*, Wardhouse, Velma Crale and Doc's three captive friends, no one had seen him near the bay; consequently, no one was aware that Doc, Ham and Monk had survived the fire unscathed at the bottom of the bay. Monk and Ham had also been equipped with oxygen apparatus, and the three men had simply had to wait calmly until the flames had died down.

Doc had spent the weeks since then making enquiries all over the world about the whereabouts of the *Uncle Penguin*. So far, these had proved fruitless. Ham, who attracted less attention than Monk or Doc, had been to the skyscraper a few times to fetch equipment that Doc thought he might need. The building was still under police guard, but so many people were constantly coming and going that Ham had managed to pass through unhindered.

With the telegram in his hand, Doc went into the adjoining room, where Ham and Monk were once again engrossed in their constant bickering. They paid no heed to Doc.

‘Stop for a moment,’ he said without any discernible impatience. ‘I’ve got something for you.’

He placed the telegram on the table. Monk and Ham fell silent mid-sentence and approached curiously. They read the text and pulled long faces. The telegram read:

SHIP BUENOS AIRES ACE LATMAN INNER VALVE EXPANDER STOP LATEST OVERTURN ON KNEE SLEEVE STOP BASE ADJUSTMENT DIVIDED STOP UNCLE PENGUIN SLAGG

“Some idiot wrote that!” claimed Monk. “He thinks the Hidalgo Trading Company is a normal trading firm dealing in ship’s equipment; that much seems clear to me. But what he really wants is incomprehensible, and the signature is a trick. I don’t think Cheaters Slagg is so daft as to send a telegram into the blue and then let himself be taken by surprise.”

“You’re an idiot yourself,” grumbled Ham. “The text is coded – any child can see that!”

Monk studied the telegram once more.

“You’re right,” he admitted meekly. “But the signature is still pointless. Why would Slagg send us a coded telegram? How would he know who’s behind the Hidalgo Trading Company?”

“He doesn’t know,” explained Ham. “So the telegram can’t have come from Slagg, but from someone else on the *Uncle Penguin* who could only send it under that name.”

“So Renny, Long Tom or Johnny.” Monk nodded. “But what does the text actually mean?”

Meanwhile, Doc had solved the little puzzle and wrote the decoded text on the form:

S. BUENOS AIRES. ALIVE. LOOKS BAD.

“The sender didn’t go about it very logically,” he explained.
“He probably didn’t have time to think it through properly. He must have had to rely on our intelligence. ‘Buenos Aires’ is written out in full as the location; for the other words, only the first letter counts. The ‘S’ probably stands for ‘south’; everything else is clear. The sender wants to let us know that nobody has died in the meantime, but the prospects are bleak.”

“So it’s Renny, Long Tom and Johnny after all!” Monk exclaimed triumphantly. “They’re alive! I told you so!”

“But that’s the only thing you said,” Ham teased, “and besides, not straight away, but only after a bit of prompting.”

Doc Savage was already on his way to the telephone.

“Shall we go there?” asked Monk.

“Yes,” said Doc.

He picked up the receiver and dialled a number. He spoke into the receiver for a while, whilst Ham and Monk resumed their bickering. At the other end of the line was the director of an aeroplane factory, of which Doc Savage was one of the major shareholders. Few people knew that he wasn’t solely occupied with hunting down criminals. The capital flowing to him from the gold mine in Central America was invested in such a way that even an economic crisis couldn’t ruin him immediately if one branch of production went downhill.

He hung up and spoke to the chairman of a shipping company in which he also held a stake. Monk and Ham weren’t listening. They were used to leaving important decisions to Doc; besides, they could well imagine why he was on the phone.

Doc hung up again.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re off to the New Jersey coast.”

The Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse, which in reality served as Doc Savage's hangar and boathouse, was still under police guard. In the meantime, the officers had forced open the doors and had had a look around the building. Most of the officers had reacted with astonishment. They had suspected that Doc was wealthy and owned a whole fleet of aeroplanes, but the fact that he also had a small airship came as a surprise to them.

Although the police now considered it likely once again that Doc was no longer alive, he had bluffed the public on more than one occasion, most recently following the attack on his laboratory. At the time, only a few police officers had been in on the secret – without them, the bluff could not have succeeded – and this time, too, the officers had no way of knowing whether some of them might know more than the rest and were supporting Doc in his struggle not only against the criminals but also against the bureaucracy. They'd been ordered to wait for Doc Savage and arrest him if he showed up, so they waited, even though they actually believed him to be dead and therefore didn't expect him to appear.

But late in the afternoon, an incident occurred which made it immediately clear even to these police officers that Doc Savage had evidently not died, but had pulled off a second bluff that surpassed even the first. Two cargo ships belonging to the same shipping company nearly collided in front of the supposed warehouse of the Hidalgo Trading Company. One of the ships swerved at the last moment and rammed into the warehouse's facilities. The hangar was built in such a way that one side ran directly along the riverbank.

Naturally, the ship sprang a leak; barrels of kerosene rolled into the water and began to leak, and – by a stroke of chance that could not be reconstructed later – the kerosene caught fire. A commotion broke out. Police officers and sailors were shouting in confusion, whistles shrieked, and someone raised the alarm. The officers and a few onlookers tried to salvage the contents of the warehouse. Meanwhile, the damaged ship turned away.

Suddenly, the roof of the wrong hangar swung open, and the airship rose slowly into the air. At first, the police officers breathed a sigh of relief. They needed no explanation to realise that this airship was the most valuable item in the hangar, and they were glad that someone had had the presence of mind

to manoeuvre it out of the hall. At the same time, it dawned on them that, firstly, someone was at work who could pilot an airship, and secondly, who was familiar with the mechanism that opened the roof. The realisation that they had been tricked became certain as the airship disappeared towards the south.

A short while later, incidentally, it grew dark, so that it would have become difficult to track the flying machine.

Around this time, it also became clear that neither the ship nor the warehouse was in any serious danger. Apart from the spilled kerosene, nothing had caught fire, and the leak was, in fact, hardly worth mentioning. The damage sustained by the front of the warehouse was only minor and could be repaired by a few bricklayers in two days. The officials took the officers of the two freighters in for questioning and grilled them thoroughly, but little came of it.

As the evening wore on, word spread through New York that an airship had temporarily descended off the coast of New Jersey. The men in smudged overalls, who returned to the city by train and travelled on to an aeroplane factory, went unnoticed by anyone.

By this time, Doc, Ham and Monk were already on board the airship; they had switched on the autopilot and were flying south.

The airship was not only equipped with the very latest technological advances – which meant it had cost almost as much as the national debt of any average European country – but also constantly supplied with sufficient fuel, so that Doc could expect to reach the South Pole without having to land and refuel en route. A permanent supply of provisions was also on board; he'd only had to take on fresh water in New Jersey.

Doc had no doubt that Flammen and Slagg were heading for the South Pole, or rather for the valley in Antarctica that Velma Crale had spoken of. Ham and Monk were less certain of this, and they discussed it with their usual lack of civility,

whilst Doc was busy once again examining the small piece of metal they had found on the torn-off wing following the incident with the *Regis* and Long Tom's aeroplane crash. The three of them were in the large gondola. Meanwhile, the airship was approaching Buenos Aires at high altitude. Doc and his two companions had not flown directly south from New York. Had they done so, they would have had to cross Central America and would have ended up on the wrong side—namely, the eastern side—of the South American continent. They had first flown south-west and then followed the coastline in a south-easterly direction.

"Brother," said Monk reverently, "this metal cigar is literally devouring the kilometres!"

"You don't need a brilliant mind to work that out," remarked Ham sarcastically. "A sextant will do. You should be focusing your intellect on the question of what on earth Flammen and Slagg are doing at the South Pole!"

"But we know that already," replied Monk. "It's all about the mysterious valley."

"Of course," scoffed Ham. "A valley! But not just any valley—those two aren't satisfied with that; it has to be at the South Pole of all places, and it's so important that people are being killed over it. Ships are being stopped and blasted with heat, Thurston H. Wardhouse is being abducted from one of these ships, and who knows what else has happened or will happen…"

"I don't know why the valley is so important," admitted Monk, "but you're no wiser than I am. I don't know where the heat waves are coming from either. But if we stay on course, sooner or later we'll find out everything!"

"Perhaps not," said Ham. "Antarctica's quite a big place; it's easy to get lost there."

The airship flew over Buenos Aires in the middle of the night, so high up that only a faint glow of the city was visible. From here, the course now headed directly south, and the men kept a lookout for

the *Uncle Penguin*. They didn't rely on their eyes or binoculars, but on infrared cameras. The images were developed and analysed immediately.

Eventually, they reached the offshore islands and the ice barrier of the sixth continent. The gondola was air-conditioned, so they felt nothing of the cold outside. Beyond the barrier stretched a seemingly endless white desert.

They didn't see the *Uncle Penguin*, but they spotted it in one of the images after they'd already flown past the ship. They turned round and resorted to using the binoculars after all. The search lasted exactly sixteen hours, then Monk pointed downwards.

'There!' he said. 'That must be it! I think it's out of the question that there's more than one ship in this area, and if I didn't have to, I wouldn't be here either. I can think of better things than spending a winter in ice and snow.'

"You're a windbag," grumbled Ham. "Even in New York there's ice and snow in winter!"

"True," said Monk, "but it's all a question of quantity."

16.

During the warm season, part of the outer ice mass had melted; it had turned into icebergs, which had drifted for a while before finally refreezing in a horseshoe shape, creating a wide harbour. Meanwhile, the ice was thawing once more, as another warm season had begun. Monk did not know – or had forgotten – that it is summer in the south when winter sweeps across the northern hemisphere.

The *Uncle Penguin* lay at anchor in the bay. Doc and his two companions did not care whether or not they were noticed by the ship's crew. They had decided to take the initiative. They descended and circled the ship.

Nothing stirred on deck; apparently the ship was as deserted as the world around it. Not even smoke was rising from the galley.

'That thing over there looks a bit like a coffin,' said Monk. 'If it weren't for the pointed bow, you could really mistake it for one …'

"You're a cheerful sort," said Ham sharply. "Someone ought to smash your skull in."

Doc Savage lowered the airship even further and brought it to a halt a hundred metres above the ship. He reached for his binoculars again, but the appearance of the *Uncle Penguin* hadn't changed.

"Bloody hell!" Monk was impressed. "Where have all the people gone? They can't all have gone for a walk!"

Doc peered towards the land—or rather, towards the white masses covering it. The snow looked fresh and untouched; it seemed to have fallen only recently.

“We’re landing,” Doc decided, “and we’ll search the ship.”

He walked over to the helm.

“But one of us should stay here,” Monk pointed out.

“Right,” said Doc. “One of you. Perhaps you could flip a coin…” Monk grinned and pulled a coin out of his pocket.

“Heads,” he said, pointing at Ham. Then he pointed at himself and said: “Tails.”

Ham agreed. He always agreed, and if he’d been allowed to choose, he’d have gone for heads anyway. He didn’t know that the coin had a number on both sides. Monk always carried it with him for just such occasions. He’d bought it in a toy shop, and it had served him well ever since.

He tossed the coin into the air and caught it. Grumpily, Ham resigned himself to the fact that he’d lost and would have to stay on the airship.

‘See you soon,’ Monk consoled him with a touch of schadenfreude. ‘I hope you don’t get bored.’

Doc gently set the airship down on the ice. Ham took the controls and steered the craft over to the *Uncle Penguin*, so that Monk and Doc simply had to step out. Thanks to the complete stillness of the wind, this manoeuvre was possible.

Whilst Monk and Doc made their way cautiously towards the bridge, Ham manoeuvred the airship back towards the ice and brought it to a halt once more, hovering just above the ground. Doc pushed open the door to the wheelhouse and stood rooted to the spot. Monk peered past him and saw a man leaning apathetically against the helm. His right hand rested on the large compass; next to it lay a revolver.

Monk decided for the second time to take the initiative. In a flash, he wriggled past Doc and threw himself at the man. The man toppled over; he crashed onto the planks like a block of concrete. Confused, Monk stood up and blinked. The man was dead and frozen stiff.

Monk retreated towards the door and wiped his hands on his parka. Doc and Ham were also wearing fur-lined parkas. They’d bought this

gear whilst on the move, when they'd taken the wrong taxi from New York to New Jersey to pick up the airship there.

"I don't understand," said Monk, shaken. "Why does this sort of thing always happen to me?"

Doc remained silent. He rolled the man onto his back and pointed to the hole in his forehead. The man had clearly been shot.

"Well," said Monk absently, "in any case, he's not one of us, so Renny, Long Tom and Johnny might still be alive."

They went below deck to the cells where the men had been locked up, just as Doc appeared on board the *Uncle Penguin*. The cells were empty.

"The ship does indeed seem to be deserted," Monk remarked wisely. "Still, we should have a look around a bit more."

And that's what they did. It took them half an hour, after which they knew for certain that there wasn't a single living soul left on board. The cargo holds were empty too.

"Didn't the girl claim the ship was loaded with a lot of stuff?" asked Monk.

"That's right," said Doc. "She mentioned a crate containing a long rubber hose – she'd actually broken into it."

"No rubber hose," Monk stated. "No crates, nothing at all. Just a shabby, rusty shell that calls itself *Uncle Penguin*." Doc went back on deck. He examined the unusually large cargo hatches; he even pushed the covers aside and peered down. One of the cargo holds appeared to have contained a machine that had also been put into operation on board; at any rate, the technical equipment for it was in place. There were cables on the walls that could obviously be connected to the machine. The cables led next door into a second room, where there had apparently also been a machine, which was now no longer there. The cables had connected the two machines to one another.

Monk knew nothing about technology; his interest began to wane.

“I think I should go ashore,” he said. “I’ll have a look around there.”

“Why not?” Doc nodded. “The lifeboats are still here – or at least some of them – you can lower one and row to the shore. Or do you need my help?”

Monk didn’t need any help. He swung a boat out and noticed that all but two of the boats were hanging from the davits. He wondered how Slagg, Flammen and the crew had got ashore without using a boat. At the same time, he knew there was no answer to that question for the time being. He put it out of his mind and rowed towards the shore.

Meanwhile, Ham was busy mooring the airship. He’d devised a method he was convinced would work: he’d used thermite to melt a hole in the ice and lowered the anchor into it. The melted water was already freezing over again.

“What a daft idea!” grumbled Monk. “Can you tell me how you intend to get the anchor out?”

“With thermite,” Ham explained coolly. “What did you find on the ship?”

Monk reported what he and Doc had discovered. Ham’s face darkened.

“No sign of Renny, Long Tom and Johnny?” he asked.

“They’re bound to be all right,” said Monk nonchalantly, fervently hoping he wasn’t mistaken. “They’re indestructible.”

Together they dropped the second anchor into the water. As they did so, they realised that the sea was only three fathoms deep at that spot.

‘And now I’m going to have a look around,’ said Monk pointedly. ‘If I spot Slagg, Flammen or any other gangster, he’s in for it.’

“Right,” said Ham. “I’ll come with you.”

“Shouldn’t you stay in the airship?”

“I’ll keep an eye on it.”

They walked along the shore, clambering over icy rocks and dodging treacherous crevasses. After a while, they returned to the airship and equipped themselves with spikes, which they strapped to their mukluks to prevent them from slipping on the ice; they also took long poles with them, intended to test unsafe areas before venturing any further.

Although the sea was calm, the loose masses of ice were constantly grinding against one another, producing an unpleasant crunching sound. At first, the men had paid it little heed, but the longer they stayed on the shore, the more disturbing the noise became. Monk grew more nervous by the minute and kept looking around suspiciously. It wasn’t just the noise; the desert of snow and ice was also getting on his nerves.

“I’m afraid I’ve had a bit of a shock,” he said quietly to Ham.
“I haven’t quite recovered yet. That bloke on the ship earlier – it was just too much. Besides, he had a revolver within reach. I was scared to death, and then he was dead…”

A booming voice piped up. It rang out from a snowdrift twenty metres ahead and sounded remarkably harsh.

“I hope you don’t get another fright!” said the voice. “Because there’s a living person here with a revolver!”

17.

Monk reacted with lightning speed and on instinct. He threw himself to one side and let himself fall, whilst Ham stood there, stunned. Monk vanished into the snow and howled at the top of his voice; then his howling grew quieter, before finally dying away. The man who'd spoken to Monk clawed his way out of the snowdrift; a revolver dangled from his hand. Ham recognised Renny.

"He's fallen into a hole!" Renny was pale. "I didn't mean for that to happen!"

"You chose the wrong time for your joke," said Ham angrily. "If Monk's dead, it'll be your fault!"

He cautiously approached the crevice into which Monk had plunged and which had been covered by the masses of snow. Renny trudged after him and peered into the crevice as well. Monk was nowhere to be seen.

"Have you seen the girl?" asked Renny weakly.

"No!" growled Ham.

"Or four blokes with guns?"

"No, not them either."

Ham poked around in the crevice with a pole. Renny watched him awkwardly.

"That girl is a real pain," he said. "I wish I'd never met her."

Ham lay on his stomach and tried to peer through the semi-darkness in the crevice. Renny shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

“The crew abandoned the ship and marched inland,” he explained. “Four men with guns stayed behind to guard me and the girl. Somewhere beyond Buenos Aires, they’d already tried to kill us once, but then decided against it. I don’t know what made them change their minds. When only the guards were left, I used the remaining thermite to weld open the door to our cell and broke out with the girl. The blokes caught us, and a brawl ensued. There was a lot of shooting, and one of the gangsters didn’t survive. He was hit by a bullet that was meant for me. The girl and I made it ashore in a lifeboat. The boat had to be moored alongside the ship; otherwise we wouldn’t have managed to escape. The girl slipped away from me. I was looking for her, and the three guards were looking for both of us. As far as I know, they lost sight of all of us after that.”

Ham fell silent. He fidgeted, trying to suppress his grief. Renny lay down beside him and also stared into the gap. A snowball smacked him in the face.

“I owed you that!” Monk called cheerfully from below. “Now we’re even.”

Ham and Renny were so stunned that they remained silent for a full ten seconds. Renny brushed the snow from his eyes.

“Are you all right?” Ham asked at last.

“The hole’s only about three metres deep,” Monk laughed. “The snow down here is really loose. I didn’t move because I wanted to get my own back on Renny for being so mean.”

Ham and Renny sat up. They handed Monk one of the poles, and he climbed back up to the surface. Renny grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s all right,” Monk declared magnanimously. “Where are Johnny and Long Tom?”

“Slagg and Flammen have taken them with them.”

“Where to?”

“No idea.” Renny shrugged. “There were three amphibious aircraft on the ship; they’d been dismantled. The lads put the planes back together and loaded the rest of the cargo into them. They flew back and forth at least fifty times before they’d got everything to their destination, wherever that may be.”

Monk took a deep breath. He now understood why most of *the Uncle Penguin’s* lifeboats were still hanging from the davits.

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Renny.

“But the girl knows something.”

“Probably,” said Renny. “I asked her, but she just laughed in my face. She said that as long as there’s still a chance she’ll get a share of the loot, she’ll keep her mouth shut.”

“You don’t seem to like the lady,” remarked Monk. Renny pulled down the hood of his sheepskin coat and pointed to some deep scratches on his face.

“That was her!” he declared in a grave voice. “And all I did was tell her she was no better than Slagg and Flammen.”

“She’s greedy,” explained Monk. “Even so, I’m starting to find her quite likeable.”

“One day a miracle will happen,” remarked Ham wisely.

“Namely?” Monk frowned.

“You’ll also come across a younger woman one day whom you won’t find likeable after a while.”

“Watch out!” Renny spun round and raised his revolver. “Someone’s coming!”

But it was too late. A man emerged from behind a chunk of ice and aimed a submachine gun at Renny, Monk and Ham.

The man was tall and thin, although he was wrapped up in an abundance of furs. He was wearing bulky gloves, so that he would not have been able to operate the weapon’s mechanism had he not come up with a clever solution

. He had attached a loop to the trigger and hooked his right index finger through it.

‘Is he one of your three guards with rifles?’ asked Monk. ‘But that’s not a rifle!’

“He’s one of the lads.” Renny nodded and lowered the revolver.
“The last time I saw him, he still had a rifle.”

“You’d better keep your mouths shut and put your hands up,” said the man gruffly. “And if you’ve got any guns in your pockets, you’d better not use them, or things might get unpleasant for you!”

Renny dropped the revolver; the three men raised their hands. Ham and Monk were unarmed. They’d left their rapid-fire pistols on the airship.

“Where’s the little minx?” asked the man.

“The girl?” Renny shook his head. “If you ask me…”

“But I’m asking you!” the man snapped. “You fled the ship with her, didn’t you!”

“That’s true,” said Renny. “She gave me a shove on the ice and was gone. It was snowing; I couldn’t follow her tracks for long.”

The man with the submachine gun thought for a moment. “That bloody minx …,” he said at last. “But you do know where Savage is, don’t you?”

“No,” said Renny truthfully.

“Then you’re of no interest to me,” said the man.

He pulled the trigger, and the submachine gun spat fire and iron.

18.

The submachine gun fired again; the man was already lying on the ground because a chunk of ice had crashed down on his head from behind. Apparently, the trigger had jammed. Monk leapt towards the man and snatched the weapon from him. The man didn't put up a fight. He had lost consciousness.

Doc emerged from behind the icicle from which he'd thrown the projectile at the armed man. Seemingly unperturbed, he walked over to his three companions.

"That was a close call." Monk swallowed. "How long have you been lying there?"

"Quite a while," said Doc. "I'd been watching the bloke."

Monk wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

"Good," he said with satisfaction. "I'd be embarrassed if you'd only turned up at the last moment, because then I'd always have to think about what would have happened if you'd been a moment late ..."

Doc went over to the unconscious man and examined him.

"He 's still still," he he stated. "He would have to be be able to give us some information."

"Let's hope so," said Renny. "I'm getting fed up with being in the dark."

Doc was about to say something else, but suddenly he spun round and ran towards the shore. Renny, Ham and Monk didn't realise what was going on, but they didn't get the impression that Doc was trotting across the ice just to get some exercise. They rushed after him.

Seconds later, they realised why Doc had suddenly been in such a hurry. A metallic clang rang out from the spot where Ham had left the airship. Then the airship came into view, and the men realised that Velma Crale had hijacked it. The clang was coming from the anchor chains.

Ham came to an abrupt halt and watched as the craft entrusted to his care was swept out to sea. The wind, which was too light to ruffle the water, was enough to set the airship in motion. Velma Crale waved amiably from the cockpit and began fiddling with the controls.

Doc, Renny and Monk also came to a halt; they realised they could not pursue the airship, even though the engines had not yet started.

'She'll have an accident,' said Renny. 'She can't handle that thing. After a hundred yards, she'll crash and be screaming for help.'

"Yes," said Ham bitterly. "But we won't be rescuing her!"

But Velma Crale didn't crash; she even managed to start the engines. The airship bucked and rocked alarmingly, but it began to rise.

'She's done it,' said Monk. 'Why shouldn't she? After all, she can fly …'

"But in aeroplanes!" grumbled Renny. "I suppose there's no accounting for taste."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"You like this person. Perhaps you'll bump into her again, and she'll knock you on the head to drive the sympathy out of you."

Doc turned on his heel. His face was expressionless, as if he hadn't just lost a valuable airship and wasn't stranded helplessly at the South Pole.

"Let's deal with the man with the submachine gun," he said.

Once again, his three companions trudged along behind him. They were less composed than he was; Ham's face, in particular, was deeply furrowed.

"It's my fault …," he lamented.

"That's right," said Monk. "You're more of a hindrance than a help. In future, you'd be better off staying at home."

They rounded an ice mound and realised that the man who'd tried to shoot Ham, Monk and Renny with the submachine gun was no longer there.

The tracks in the snow made it clear that the man hadn't left of his own accord. Two men had found him, picked him up and carried him away.

'Those two blokes who were on board with him,' said Renny. 'Of course! We shouldn't all have run off.'

Doc was already following the trail. It curved back towards the bay.

"They've probably hidden a boat somewhere," said Renny.
"If they've reached it, they'll be just as out of our reach as the airship."

He hadn't been wrong. The boat was already a long way from the shore. Two men were rowing; the third was still unconscious.

"They're not out of reach yet!" said Ham angrily.

He snatched the submachine gun from Monk—which Monk had taken from the gaunt man—and raised it to his shoulder. He shouted loudly: "Stop! Turn back, or we'll shoot!" The men in the boat answered his demand with revolver shots. Ham swore and pulled the trigger repeatedly. After three shots, he was forced to cease fire, as the magazine was empty. Ham swore and threw the weapon into the snow.

The three men reached the *Uncle Penguin* and climbed aboard. A short while later, the diesel engines could be heard, the anchor chain was hauled in, the ship picked up speed and headed out of the bay. Doc stood close to the water's edge and watched the ship silently as it sailed away.

His three friends were more talkative.

‘So that’s it, then,’ said Renny morosely. ‘We’re stuck, as sailors say.’

“The most we could do is swim to South America,” said Ham gloomily.

“And we’ve got nothing to eat,” grumbled Monk.

‘We’re at least a thousand miles from the nearest settlement,’ said Renny.

“Yes,” said Monk, “and unless a miracle happens, that’s where we’ll stay.”

Doc Savage looked over at the airship again. By now it had reached a considerable height, but it didn’t seem to be climbing any further. He pulled a pair of binoculars out of his parka and peered through them. The binoculars had dark lenses.

The three men looked at him in bewilderment. They knew that the lenses made invisible infrared rays visible and couldn’t understand why Doc was using them now. He put the binoculars down and smiled.

‘Would you like to have a go too?’ he asked.

Ham took the binoculars from him and looked through them.

“Well, I never,” he said, taken aback. “The airship is sparkling like a lighthouse!”

“I don’t understand why you’re so surprised,” said Doc. “You know there’s an infrared lamp under the gondola so that we can find our way at night if necessary.”

“That’s right,” said Renny. “But we didn’t know it was switched on. We can still make out the airship from a hundred miles away, but I still don’t see what use that is to us.”

“When we got out, I switched the lamp on,” explained Doc. “As a precaution. If we assume that Velma Crale is flying north, the airship can serve as a compass to help us find Flammen and his entourage, and if she’s flying towards the valley, we just need to follow her.”

19.

The airship turned and flew south. The four men at the bay no longer doubted that Velma Crale had set course for the mysterious valley, and Monk recommended that they set off in the same direction without delay. Ham and Renny had no objection, but Doc insisted on a delay of twenty-four hours.

Using a knife, he sharpened one of the poles that Monk and Ham had fetched from the airship and used it as a spear. He managed to catch three large fish, which were to serve as provisions for the journey. Doc gutted the fish and left them to freeze.

The men slept for a few hours in the snow cave that Monk had discovered quite by accident, and finally set off. It was still light, for at this time of year the sun does not set in Antarctica. The journey south proved to be more gruelling than they had imagined. They were already familiar with the Sahara, the Valley of Death and the most unknown of all deserts, the Arabian Rub' al-Khali, but no comparison could be made with this wasteland of ice and snow. The terrain was only reasonably flat near the coast; further on, it became hilly and rugged. Moreover, there was three feet of snow, into which the men kept sinking.

The only living creatures they encountered were three penguins that, for some inexplicable reason, had strayed inland, and that was on the fifth day. On the sixth day, a wind suddenly picked up, making it impossible to continue their march for the time being. The wind whipped up the snow and blew it into the men's eyes; they had no choice but to take shelter behind a rock.

In this way, they lost two days, as they realised from Doc's calendar watch, for they had long since lost all sense of time. Eventually, Doc decided to press on, even though the wind had not yet died down. He had come to terms with it. By now, the men's mukluks were nothing but tatters. They tore pieces from their parkas and from Renny's sheepskin coat and wrapped them around their feet. Their supply of frozen fish had dwindled alarmingly.

Gradually it grew warmer; the wind was no longer driving as much snow before it, and the sky was clearing. Then they found the airship – the remains of the airship: a heap of twisted, scorched metal.

'A bomb!' said Monk. 'The girl…!'

The men searched the wreckage; they also searched the immediate surroundings. They found neither the girl nor a charred corpse.

"Monk's right," said Doc, as they gathered once more around the dented framework. "The airship didn't crash; it was on the ground and was blown up. There's a deep hole under the hull; that's where the explosive must have been. What's more, the crates we had on board are no longer there. Someone's taken them."

"Whoever these people are," said Monk, "I'm putting my money on Flammen and Slagg, and I'm prepared to take any bet."

No one wanted to bet with him. Doc rummaged through the burnt-out gondola once more, whilst the others stayed outside, lost in their thoughts, which weren't particularly cheerful.

"Maybe those blokes took the girl with them too," said Monk after a while. "If she's been captured, we might be able to rescue her."

Ham and Renny remained sullenly silent. They were less soft-hearted than Monk. They resented Velma Crale for stealing the airship. She had only herself to blame for her misfortune.

Doc came out into the open with a small steel box that the looters had apparently overlooked. He examined the contents; they were intact and consisted of vitamin and calorie tablets, which would keep the four men going for weeks if necessary.

‘Marvellous!’ said Renny. ‘At least we won’t starve for the time being; that’s some consolation, at any rate.’

“Small comfort,” grumbled Ham, “but you learn to make do over time.”

“Stay here,” said Doc. “I’m going to have a look around.”

Doc didn’t go far. He just wanted to find out whether an aeroplane had landed nearby. He found the skid marks of three aircraft, and he also realised that not all the men who had attacked the airship had come from the aeroplanes. Some had come on foot, which suggested that the mysterious valley couldn’t be far away.

He went back and reported his findings.

“From now on, we’ll have to be more careful,” he said. “The valley is probably just beyond that hill – that’s where the tracks lead.”

The hill lay to the south-west and was not easy to make out, as the white expanse of earth seemed to blend into the bright sky. The tracks left by the men, however, were all the more clearly visible.

Doc had underestimated the distance. It took him and his companions another twelve hours before they reached the ridge, which had looked like a single hump from a distance. In fact, it was a low mountain range, snow-covered only in places; bare rocks jutted out between them. The temperature had risen.

Monk was at the front and was the first to look out over the landscape beyond the mountains. He stopped abruptly.

‘Unbelievable!’ he said breathlessly. ‘There’s a person walking around with an umbrella!’

20.

The man was part of *the Uncle Penguin's* crew; Doc and his men had spotted him on the shore of Connecticut during the commotion in the bay, and he had caught their attention because of his bony build. However, he wasn't holding an umbrella now; instead, the thing he was holding over his head was the size of a garden parasol and made of the mirror-like material that Doc had found on the bent wing of Long Tom's machine. The man was carrying the parasol in his right hand and a rifle with a telescopic sight in his left.

He climbed onto a high rock, looked around carefully for a crack in the stone and inserted the umbrella's shaft into it. He sat down comfortably under the umbrella and glanced at his watch, then peered past the umbrella up at the sky. Seconds later, a signal sounded like a police siren. The man pulled a rope out of his pocket, wrapped it round his neck and tied the other end to the umbrella shaft.

'He's worried about his umbrella,' scoffed Monk. 'He's afraid it'll get nicked. But what was that siren? There's probably no police at the South Pole…'

"Probably not," said Doc. "Quick, we've got to get back!"

He turned on his heel and ran down the slope. Renny, Monk and Ham trotted after him. They didn't know what the signal meant, but the precautions the man with the umbrella had taken suggested that the next few minutes would not be entirely without danger.

At first, Doc and his men felt a sudden heat that grew by the minute. They peered at the sun, which had suddenly become brighter

scorching; the sky, too, was now so glaring that the men had to squint.

‘We’re no better off than the lot on the Regis,’ said Ham. ‘If we don’t get out of here, we’ll be roasted!’

They staggered, stumbled, fell into puddles, picked themselves up and hurried on. A shot rang out behind them, but no whizzing bullet could be heard. More shots followed, creating a staccato of gunfire. Doc stopped and listened.

“That’s not aimed at us,” he said. “The prisoners are probably trying to escape.”

“That changes everything!” declared Monk. “We’re turning back.”

‘We’re not turning back,’ said Doc. ‘But we’ll cut off the pursuers.’

Once more they listened. They tried to work out the route the alleged fugitives might have taken based on the direction the shots were coming from, and set off again. The four men were drenched in sweat; their parkas were becoming a nuisance. Monk stopped to take off his cloak.

“Better not,” said Doc. “The clothes might block some of the rays.”

“Rays?!” Monk stared at him in horror. “Do you think the criminals are experimenting with death rays?”

“No,” said Doc. “The rays we’re feeling are coming from the sky.”

“Why?” asked Renny. “What’s the sky got to do with these rags?”

Doc didn’t answer, for he saw what the crew of the *Uncle Penguin* had been aiming at.

Johnny, Long Tom, Wardhouse and Velma Crale were running across the barren, icy expanse, followed by Derek Flammen and a few men from his unit. Flammen and his entourage were holding what looked like fantastical umbrellas over their heads. The fugitives were defenceless.

“We’re running towards Long Tom and the others,” said Doc. “We’ve got nothing to lose.”

At that very moment, the refugees spotted Doc and his companions and changed direction. Doc and the others hurried towards them. The two groups met halfway, whilst Flammen and his men continued to fire. They missed; the distance was still too great for that.

The heat was still rising. Long Tom and Johnny breathed a sigh of relief and waved to Doc and the others. They were so out of breath they couldn’t speak. Wardhouse was in better shape. He stared at Renny and shook his head.

‘There you are,’ he said. ‘I thought you were dead!’

“Not that I know of …,” remarked Renny with a touch of gallows humour. “At least, not yet!”

“I’d had a row with Slagg,” explained Wardhouse. “He said that to punish me, he’d killed you, and that the rest of the prisoners would suffer the same fate if I didn’t follow his orders. That’s why we decided to escape.”

“Why is it a punishment for you if Slagg kills me?”

“He’s got his own way of thinking, I suppose; besides, he wanted to intimidate me.”

“We shouldn’t be chatting here,” said Doc. “We’d better run as fast as we can!”

“Right!” the girl chimed in. “You can have a chat once we’re safe.”

“Wardhouse,” said Doc, “how far does the heat extend?”

“Five miles,” said Wardhouse, “roughly…”

They started running again. After a while, Monk slowed down and pointed towards the sky.

‘We won’t make it!’ he gasped. ‘There’s a plane!’ Seconds later, they realised they weren’t dealing with one aeroplane, but three

. The men and the girl came to a halt. The sky was so blinding that no one could look up.

‘Don’t try it!’ warned Wardhouse. ‘You’ll ruin your eyes. Slagg didn’t listen to me and ruined his eyes, which is why he always wears tinted glasses.’

“The heat must have caught up with us by now,” said Doc. “We’re not in the centre, but it can hardly get any worse than this here.”

“You’re right,” replied Wardhouse. “I hadn’t expected us to get this far at all.”

The noise of the aeroplanes grew louder.

‘If I’ve understood the process correctly,’ said Doc, ‘the high-altitude beams are enabled by the electromagnetic pulses emitted by your devices…’

“The same devices that were fitted to the *Uncle Penguin*.” Wardhouse nodded. “Flammen had all the equipment flown into the valley and set up there.”

“Doc!” Monk was baffled. “So you know where the heat is coming from?”

“Only roughly.”

“Explain it to us,” said Monk sarcastically. “Once I’ve got my head round it, I’m sure I’ll die a little more easily.”

“As is well known, the Earth’s atmosphere blocks a significant proportion of what are known as cosmic rays, which come from space and from the Sun,” explained Doc. “Some of these rays are harmless, others can cause mutations, whilst still others are likely to be fatal. This radiation, which consists of very high-energy primary particles, shatters the atomic nuclei in the air upon impact, thereby producing secondary particles, which in turn …”

“Stop!” cried Monk, startled. “That’s too convoluted for me. So the gangsters are using a device that alters the atmosphere in such a way that high-altitude rays strike the Earth. Is that more or less correct?”

“That’s a simplified way of putting it,” said Doc. “The heat we’re feeling is, in fact, a barrage of cosmic rays.”

“And when did you work that out?”

“On the way here in the airship. I had a good think about it then.”

“I see,” said Monk. “Am I wrong in assuming that Wardhouse hatched this treacherous contraption?”

“Unfortunately, you’re not wrong,” replied Wardhouse contritely. “It was a coincidence. I’d been working on a method of using rays to penetrate fog; it was intended to make take-off and landing easier for aeroplanes. Then I noticed that it got warm when I switched the device on. I knew Flammen personally and told him about my discovery. He took an immediate interest and provided me with funds to develop it further. That’s what I did. I later learnt from Velma Crale why Flammen was so interested. I went to see him again and demanded a share of the anticipated profits. He agreed to this, and I travelled to England to buy some spare parts. Then Velma told me that Flammen was trying to swindle me. Perhaps she was exaggerating, but in any case, around that time Flammen started murdering people – and I wanted nothing to do with that. Eventually, Flammen and Slagg raided the *Regis* to get their hands on me …”

The three aeroplanes were now alarmingly close. Machine-gun fire rattled out, and all around Doc and his companions, bullets were embedding themselves in the snow.

“He can’t be serious,” said Wardhouse. “Flammen won’t risk killing me.”

“Is there a sensible reason for that?” asked Monk.

“He needs me,” said Wardhouse simply. “He can’t repair the machine on his own.”

The planes came down and raced past the fugitives at low altitude; one touched down on the snow with its skids and skidded a little further, whilst the other two pulled back up.

‘What a mess!’ remarked Renny. ‘And we’re completely helpless

It was still so bright that the men and the girl could barely make out anything; nevertheless, they noticed that the upper surface of the

aircraft was clad in the same shiny material as the umbrellas that Flammen and his men carried for protection. The aircraft's door flew open, and Derek Flammen stuck his head out.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "We've got an offer for you!"

Neither Doc nor his companions moved. They waited.

"We need Wardhouse!" shouted Flammen. "Surrender, and none of you will come to any harm as long as Wardhouse sticks to our agreement!"

"He'll certainly keep his word," Wardhouse grinned wryly. "He's got no other choice. I've made sure that no one in Flammen's crew has learnt how to operate the machine—at least not permanently. At the slightest mishap, they'll be relying on me."

"I don't trust that bloke!" said Monk quietly.

"None of us trust him," said Doc. "But the question is whether we stand a chance or not. We won't make it back to the coast, and even if we did, we wouldn't be able to get away."

"So we're at this bloke's mercy!" concluded Monk.

"Exactly," said Doc, and called out loudly, "We agree!"

"Stay where you are!" shouted Flammen. "My men will be here soon."

They did indeed arrive, and were in such a foul mood that some made moves to shoot Doc and his companions down like hares in a hunt. But Flammen intervened.

"Stop!" he commanded. "I promised that nothing would happen to these people; besides, our operation will collapse without Wardhouse. We know how to handle the device, but if something goes wrong, we'll be left looking like fools—and something always goes wrong."

Flammen's group herded the prisoners under the strange umbrellas. The heat was still considerable here too, but the cosmic rays were blocked to a significant extent; moreover, Doc and his entourage could look around without their eyes watering.

“They’re parasols,” said a joker to Monk. “We brought them along so you lot don’t get a bit of a screw loose.”

“Thanks!” Monk replied grimly. “But when the day of reckoning comes, you’ll need more than umbrellas to stop me from wringing your necks one by one!”

Slowly, they began their retreat towards the range of hills. They left the rocks behind them and could now see the valley clearly for the first time.

“I’m disappointed!” declared Renny with utter conviction. “I don’t understand why this valley is supposed to be valuable!”

21.

The valley was merely a shallow hollow, which had evidently been filled with snow before the cosmic rays did their work. In the deeper parts of the hollow, deep pools of water glistened. On the opposite slope stood a few huts, the only remarkable feature of which was that their roofs were made of the glittering material designed to block the rays. Monk took a closer look at the canopy above his head. He had the impression that it was made of a lead alloy covered with a layer of chrome.

Doc and his companions were herded towards the huts. They now noticed that stone houses were rising up behind the barracks, though they were not yet finished.

‘These blokes are setting themselves up here for the long haul,’ said Monk.

“That’s right,” said Wardhouse. “It’ll take years to exploit the valley, and Flammen certainly won’t give up as long as there’s still something to be gained.”

‘And what’s there to get out of it?’ Monk wanted to know.

Wardhouse didn’t get a chance to answer the question, because Cheater’s Slagg stepped out of one of the barracks and hammered Monk over the head with the butt of a rifle. Monk hit the ground, shook himself, and got back up. He clenched his fists to attack Slagg. Slagg grinned.

“No talking allowed here!” declared Slagg. “Bear that in mind – it’ll save you a few bumps!”

“You scoundrel!” Monk said venomously. “I’ll snap your neck!”

Slagg grinned even wider and aimed the rifle at Monk’s stomach. Monk stopped dead in his tracks.

“Monk,” Doc warned, “calm down!”

Monk calmed down. Slagg herded the prisoners into the most primitive barracks, consisting of nothing more than three walls and a

roof, posted a guard outside it, and walked towards Flammen, who had meanwhile landed his aeroplane outside the valley. The other two aircraft had also touched down.

Monk rubbed his bump; he had momentarily forgotten his curiosity. The floor of the barrack was muddy, and there wasn’t a single piece of furniture. Neither the men nor the girl were so exhausted that they would have been prepared to lie down in the mud, although they suspected that sooner or later they would have no other choice. They crouched down, leaned against the walls and remained silent.

Slagg and Flammen approached the barracks, peered inside, smiled and withdrew again. They stopped out of earshot of the prisoners.

‘They don’t look very happy,’ said Slagg, pointing his thumb towards the barracks. ‘They’re probably already regretting sticking their noses into our business.’

Flammen nodded thoughtfully. He grabbed Slagg by the elbow.

‘I want to talk to you,’ he said.

“Certainly,” said Slagg. “Why not?”

“Alone with you,” said Flammen.

He dragged Slagg a little further away and stopped once more. Both took care not to stray out of the shelter of the umbrella by accident, and cast a critical glance at their victims.

“We can’t hold them captive for long,” said Flammen. “We’ll only be asking for trouble.”

“Yes,” said Slagg.

“Savage will be hatching something,” said Flammen. “He’ll find a way to escape; you can’t take him seriously enough in that respect.”

“Yes,” said Slagg.

‘If we could make Wardhouse believe they’re still alive, we could get rid of them.’

“Yes.”

‘Can’t you say something different for a change?!’

“Certainly. How shall we go about it?”

“We could pretend we’re taking them to the ship by plane – and once they’re out of the valley, we’ll shoot them down.”

“But Wardhouse won’t believe they’re still alive…”

“We’ll tell them to agree on a secret code with Wardhouse, so that they can send him a message by radio from time to time to prove they’re not dead.”

“But if the code is secret,” Slagg pointed out, “then we won’t know it!”

“We’ll find out,” Flammen declared. “We’ll beat them until they tell us the code.”

“Very clever!” praised Slagg.

“Isn’t it?” Flammen said, amused.

They patted each other on the shoulders and walked off in opposite directions. Doc Savage watched them go and took a deep breath.

“They want to kill us,” he said.

“How do you know that?” Wardhouse was alarmed. “Slagg and Flammen were just talking about it.”

“But you couldn’t possibly have heard that!”

‘I read it on their lips.’ Wardhouse was sceptical and impressed at the same time. ‘Remarkable,’ said Johnny. ‘The facts

should spur our minds on to unusual vigour."

"Could you repeat that?" asked Velma Crale.

"He means we should think quickly and sharply," explained Monk.

"Thank you." The girl gave Monk a ravishing smile. "I hope you'll stay around for a while longer to translate his unusual language into plain words for me."

"He'll be delighted to," said Ham with a smirk. "All a young woman has to do is flash him a smile, and he'll climb trees for her."

"You bloody word-twister!" roared Monk. "I'll shut your mouth!"

"Hey!" called the man with the rifle who was guarding the prisoners. "If you don't keep quiet, I'll put you on starvation rations."

For an hour, absolutely nothing happened. The sentry outside the barracks was bored, and the prisoners devised escape plans, only to discard them again straight away. Neither Flammen nor Slagg were to be seen.

'I will not tolerate you being taken away from here,' Wardhouse said quietly at last. 'You can count on me!'

"How long can you keep Flammen under pressure?" asked Monk.

"Quite a long time." Wardhouse laughed. "The equipment is complicated."

The guard turned round and frowned. Monk paid no heed.

'What's in this valley?' he asked again. 'Why is it valuable?'

And once again, Wardhouse found no opportunity to answer the question. The guard strode into the barracks and brandished his weapon.

"That's enough!" he snapped. "Line up one by one with your faces to the wall, and the first one who makes a sound gets a bullet through the head!"

The prisoners lined up side by side at regular intervals and stared at the wall. The guard went back outside. A short while later, Slagg and Flammen arrived and put forward their suggestion that the prisoners be taken to the ship, as it would supposedly be more comfortable for them there. Doc turned round and repeated the conversation he'd read from Flammen and Slagg's lips. With long faces, Slagg and Flammen slunk off again.

Velma Crale spoke up, evidently convinced that the guard would not strike a woman. She recounted her misadventure with the airship. Apparently, one of Flammen's henchmen had spotted it and raised the alarm. The aeroplanes had attacked the airship.

"I couldn't get to grips with the controls," she said meekly.
"They forced me to land."

The guard ordered her to shut up at last. She wanted to protest against this rude language, but fell silent because Slagg and Flammen had returned. They ordered the prisoners to be separated, but not, as Flammen explained, for the sake of convenience, but to nip any escape attempts in the bud.

Doc was given the sturdiest barracks. On top of that, Slagg posted not just one, but two guards outside his door.

From his hut, Doc watched as Flammen's men built a dam across the valley. A powerful pump was set up nearby, and hoses were connected to the machine.

Wardhouse paid Doc a visit; apparently, he was able to move about relatively freely whilst under guard. He did not speak, but formed the words with his lips so that the guards would not notice.

'Flammen and a few of his cronies have hidden themselves in the engine room,' explained Wardhouse. 'They watched as I switched on the machine. Unfortunately, I realised it too late.'

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked Doc.

“Absolutely certain,” replied Wardhouse. “They’ll try it themselves once or twice now, and if they manage it, we’ll be eliminated.”

Doc realised he had no time to lose. The plan he had devised in the meantime was not without risk, but doing nothing was even more dangerous.

Once Wardhouse had withdrawn, looking embarrassed, Doc took the initiative. Once again, he sought refuge in the Mayan language, which had already got him and his friends out of a tight spot more than once. He had to prepare his men without risking that Flammen’s gang would thwart his plan. If the two guards came in to silence him, he didn’t mind.

The two guards listened to the strange sounds with obvious confusion. They ordered Doc to keep quiet, but he paid no heed. He carried on talking.

The guards were undecided.

‘He’s gone mad,’ said one.

“Yes,” said the other. “What shall we do?”

“We could shoot him,” said his colleague. “But we could also get the flamethrowers.”

“If we shoot, there’ll be trouble,” claimed the first guard.
“Wardhouse threatened to call a strike if anything happened to one of his mates.”

“So the flamethrowers it is…,” decided his colleague.

“We don’t need him.” The other guard was against constantly bothering the boss with trivial matters. “We’ll smash this Savage over the head with the butt of our rifles; then he’ll definitely keep quiet.”

They stormed into the hut to put their words into action. But they hadn’t reckoned with Doc’s strength or his speed. He darted between the two men and hammered his fist under one of their chins. The man groaned and dropped to his knees. The second guard fired a warning shot into the air, then Doc had

grabbed him by the throat with both hands. But he didn't choke him. He pressed his fingers against the nerve centre at the base of the skull, and the man went limp and lost consciousness.

Doc dropped him, pulled the revolver from his holster and ran over to Renny's lodgings. They were the closest to his own.

22.

Doc was convinced that his companions would do the right thing; they must have known when to make their move. The shot fired by the guard was an unmistakable signal.

The sentry outside Renny's hut spotted Doc and took aim with his rifle. Doc raised his revolver. He was an excellent marksman, even though he'd got into the habit of hardly ever carrying a weapon.

The bullet struck the guard in the thigh and knocked him off his feet. The man screamed in pain until Renny came out of the hut and silenced him with a punch.

But by now, Flammen's accomplices had been alerted. They started firing wildly – with everything they had. Doc zigzagged across the area. Apparently, the gangsters were so flustered that they'd forgotten all about Wardhouse's threat.

Doc knew which building housed the device that was emitting the electromagnetic pulses. He had watched Wardhouse as he went back into the building and now hurried towards it. The house was not large and stood on a low hill; it was remarkably sturdy, built of massive ashlars to withstand the storms that must result from the unnatural warming of the air. The roof was made of shimmering metal and could be slid back completely.

Doc reached the low, square door, darted through it and threw himself to one side. Two men jumped to their feet and raised their guns; apparently, they hadn't heard the commotion outside. A petrol engine and a generator were making quite a racket. Doc didn't fire; he didn't want to

damage the sensitive equipment inside the building through negligence. He pressed the revolver against one of the guards' heads, whereupon the man collapsed without a sound; Doc knocked out the second guard with an uppercut before he could pull the trigger.

Out of the corner of his eye, Doc saw that the two guards were not alone. Slagg and Flammen were lurking in the background. Both were armed. Wardhouse was with them. Slagg and Flammen were less cautious than Doc. They fired.

Doc leapt to the side and ducked behind the generator. He was safe for the moment, but he could tell that this safety wouldn't last.

"Attack him from the right!" shouted Flammen. "I'll come from the left!"

Apparently Slagg agreed with the suggestion, for Doc felt the wooden floor vibrate with hurried footsteps. Then he heard Slagg swearing loudly.

"What's going on?" shouted Flammen.

"My glasses!" wailed Slagg. "That bloody Wardhouse knocked them off my face—I can't see a thing!"

Slagg swore again, and Doc realised that Wardhouse had pounced on him. Next to Doc was a metal toolbox; he took out a hammer, a spanner and a pair of pliers. As Flammen rounded the generator, Doc hurled the hammer. Flammen ducked and fired, but the shot missed. He fired again, and Doc hurled the spanner. Once more Flammen dodged, but the pliers struck him squarely on the shoulder. Flammen dropped his gun and retreated.

Wardhouse and Slagg were still locked in a struggle, fighting like cats and dogs. Flammen kicked Wardhouse in the temple, and Wardhouse went limp. Flammen grabbed Slagg and ran out of the building with him. Doc bolted the door behind them.

At last he had the chance to take a closer look at Wardhouse's invention. It wasn't much different from what Doc had imagined. The

device resembled an unusually powerful radio transmitter; it even had a dial. There were also numerous indicator lights and a veritable tangle of cables. Doc picked up the weapons that Flammen and Slagg had dropped, gave the unconscious Wardhouse a cursory examination, and peered outside through a crack in the door.

His companions were in the process of fighting their way towards the stone house.

They had all managed to break out of their cells. Renny was also an excellent marksman, and he had supported the others. Doc now fired as well, to force Flammen's men to take cover. Flammen and his accomplices returned fire. Wardhouse came round and stumbled towards the door, where he immediately collapsed again with a bullet in his hip.

He cursed horribly; he was still cursing as the prisoners stormed into the stone house. Velma Crale looked at him in bewilderment. He gritted his teeth and fell silent.

'We've done it,' Monk declared, needlessly. 'What do we do now?'

Doc turned to Wardhouse.

"The projector isn't currently operating at full power…?" he asked. Wardhouse glanced at the control panels and shook his head.

"How much of a difference will it make if we turn it up further?" asked Doc.
"Will that amplify the cosmic rays?"

"Significantly!" said Wardhouse.

"Doc, come here!" said Renny. He was standing by the door, looking out. "Look at that!"

Doc hurried over to him. From up here, there was a good view of the valley, and Doc noticed that Flammen and his men hadn't just built the dam. They had excavated part of the valley and dug long, narrow, brick-lined channels, to which several hoses led.

“Flammen needed water to wash out the rock,” explained Renny. “But there’s no water here—just ice and snow. The heat has melted the ice, and the dam gives Flammen enough pressure.”

“Wardhouse!” said Monk forcefully. “What on earth is in this valley? I’ve asked you twice already, but never got an answer!”

“Platinum,” said Wardhouse, “and a bit of gold as well. Didn’t I tell you that?”

“Not to me!” retorted Monk. “I’ve only ever…” He broke off and listened, for Flammen was speaking up again from outside.

“We’ve got dynamite!” roared Flammen. “Come out, or we’ll blow you to hell!”

The demand was so unambiguous that Doc saw no point in replying. He turned to Wardhouse once more.

“I’ll help you,” he said, “turn the projector up to full power.”

He helped Wardhouse to his feet and supported him. Wardhouse pressed a few buttons. The hum of the generator grew louder; the needles on the control panels danced.

“Hey!” shouted Flammen. “I’m waiting for an answer! We don’t want to destroy the equipment, but we’ll do it if you leave us no other choice!” Doc set Wardhouse back down on the floor and walked to the door. Once more he peered through the crack at the outside; he took care to stay under the canopy.

Flammen’s accomplices seemed to be growing more uneasy by the second; they were sweating, and some were already holding their hands up to shield their eyes.

‘You’ve probably only got half an hour left to live!’ cried Doc.
“The machine’s now running at full power – your shields won’t stand a chance against it.”

“You can’t do that!” screeched Flammen. Monk

laughed.

“Why not, actually?” he asked.

It was getting hot even under the shelter, and Doc and his companions’ eyes were stinging. Doc had the impression that his brain was working more sluggishly than usual.

“To the aeroplanes!” ordered Flammen. “We’ll bomb this thing before the rays destroy us!”

An aeroplane engine roared to life, moved away and then drew nearer again. The aircraft was clearly in the air. Renny had taken a rifle from one of the guards and was about to step outside with it. But Doc shook his head silently and took the rifle from him. He climbed onto the generator, where he had the best line of fire through the open roof.

“When I give you the signal, switch off the projector,” he said to Wardhouse.

Wardhouse nodded and hobbled over to his equipment. Doc waited. He couldn’t see the aeroplane; it was too bright outside for that. He could only rely on his hearing. Finally, he beckoned to Wardhouse, and Wardhouse flicked a lever. Almost immediately, the blinding brightness subsided, and Doc took aim and fired.

The aeroplane was now very close; it did not appear to have been hit. Doc fired twice more. Finally, he fired a fourth shot, and at last the engine fell silent. The pilot tried to save the aircraft by gliding, but at that very moment Wardhouse switched the projector back on.

Doc had been watching the aeroplane. The sudden brightness hit him like a blow. He held his hands up to his face, leapt off the generator and staggered under the roof.

The aeroplane spun, crashed and vanished in a cloud of smoke and fire. The dynamite charge exploded, shaking the ground for miles around. Once again, Wardhouse switched off his projector.

The men outside wanted to surrender. They did not dare to board the two remaining aeroplanes and make their escape northwards; they had lost their optimism and self-confidence.

‘Let Flammen and Slagg come in on their own first,’ ordered Doc.

“That’s not possible,” said one of the men. “They were in the plane.”

Doc accepted the men’s surrender. He climbed into one of the two planes himself, flew to *the Uncle Penguin* and threatened the three sailors on board over the radio that he would send them to the bottom of the sea with dynamite if they did not surrender. They did so. The next few hours were spent transporting the survivors from Flammen’s crew to *the Uncle Penguin*. Upon their return to civilisation, they were to be treated at Doc’s institute in upstate New York.

Meanwhile, Doc convinced himself that there were indeed considerable quantities of platinum and gold in the valley. He proposed a division: Velma Crale and Wardhouse were to receive half between them, whilst the other half was to be donated to a charitable foundation.

Velma Crale refused and waived her share. She did not elaborate on her reasons, but Doc knew that she could not absolve herself of the blame for the disaster that had occurred. Wardhouse did not want to be outdone; he also waived his share. Doc assured him that he would finance his experiments in future.

Eventually, everyone involved was back on board; only Ham, Monk and the girl were still down in the valley. They had two aeroplanes at their disposal, and Ham and Monk were arguing over who should fly the girl.

‘We’ll flip a coin,’ Monk decided. He pulled his trick coin out of his pocket. ‘You take heads, because you always take heads.’

Ham agreed. Monk tossed the coin into the air, but he didn’t catch it. It fell into the snow, and Ham bent down to pick it up. And at last he realised why he’d always lost at this game. He grabbed a spanner and smashed it against Monk’s skull.

‘You’re a notorious cheat!’ he ranted. ‘You deserved that lesson, so you’ve got no right to complain.’

Monk didn't complain; he was unconscious. Ham turned round, intending to signal to Velma Crale to get in with him, but Velma Crale was no longer there. Whilst Ham and Monk had been embroiled in their dispute, she had seized one of the machines and flown off alone to *the Uncle Penguin*.

THE END

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